Confronting Fundamentalism with Education Policy: Analysis of NGO Schools in Bangladesh

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The escalation of NGO run schools in Bangladesh has emerged as a challenge to the hegemony of the religious fundamentalists groups, who were the traditional patrons of the religious schools or madrassas. Most NGO schools have maturad into thriving alternatives to the country's weak and ineffective public education system; whereas, historically, it was the madrassas, which filled the void of public education through religious teachings. The NGO-run schools offer separate curricula, which are often rooted in the experiences to the working poor of Bangladesh. These non-formal primary education programs target the poor, especially girls, and offer flexible and shorter hours of offeration, often adjusted to seasonal and regional demands. Iwant to trace the evolution of such NGO-run schools as major contenders in the public exucation system and their role in confronting fundamentalism through their curricula and accessibillity in Bangladesh.

Introduction

NGOs in Bangladesh, like in most third world countries, have dominated the discourse of development through various income generation and gender empowerment programs. As NGOs have successfully challenged the hegemony of the religious fundamentalist groups over the last three decades, the wrath of fundamentalist groups is currently being directed towards the NGO-run schools. Most NGO schools have matured into thriving alternatives to Bangladesh's weak and ineffective public education system; whereas, historically, it was *madrassahs*, which filled the void of public education through religious teachings. The NGO-run schools offer separate curricula which are often rooted in the experiences of the working poor of Bangladesh. These non-formal primary education programs target the poor, especially girls, and offer flexible and shorter hours of operation, often adjusted to seasonal and regional demands. BRAC and PROSHIKA, two major NGOs, have emerged as leading publishers of children's literature

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with a strong commitment towards education. I want to trace the evolution of such NGO-run schools as major contenders in the public education system and their role in confronting fundamentalism through their curricula and accessibility in Bangladesh.

The first part of the paper begins with a brief discussion of the concept of social capital in the context of Bangladesh; although the NGO income generating projects, and especially group loans, have already been credited for advancing social capital, non-formal education has attracted little attention in this regard. The second section deals with the evolution of the public education system of Bangladesh: a system in which only the privileged had access was transformed into an obligation via government policies after 1971, though meaningful realization of such policies did not occur until the 1990s. A distinctive characteristic of the public education system of Bangladesh is its centrality of government control, despite the multiplicity of institutions engaged in imparting primary and secondary education. The next part of the paper documents the growth of *madrassahs* and their relevance to education and social change. The following section deals with the emerging trend of alternative education sources, especially the non-formal education provided by the NGO schools. The last section provides a comparison of the pedagogy and curricula of the three school systems. It is interesting to note that although the Bangladesh government has tremendous power over all public, private, and non-formal schools since it remains the main source of finance, the government policy, in general, has been flexible regarding the curricula. The *Madrassah* Education Board has to follow the guidelines set by the government, yet a substantial number of *madrassahs* remain outside the purview of the *Madrassah* Education Board. NGO-run non-formal schools and private schools in urban areas use separate textbooks and set their own course curricula. The NGO schools voluntarily follow the general course outlines set by the Bangladesh Education Board since one of their main targets is to return the mainstream school dropouts to the government school system.

The Concept of Social Capital

Social capital, the collective norms and networks in a community, has come to be accepted as a component of economic growth from the 1990s onwards. As an iterative process, it is built through trust and reciprocity, leading to a viable civil society, which is able to dictate the policies concerning its own communities (Skidmore, 2001: 53). Theoretically, this

idea was a departure from previous modernization or development frameworks that neglected the economic potential of intangible social support systems. Extended from the ideas of dependency and world-system theorists, who focused on the reciprocal relationships between corporate and political elites, social capital attempted to transform the interdependent social network of the poor into collective power (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000: 4).

Recent scholarship regarding social capital is devoted to develop quantifiable measures of social capital and its contribution to economic development. One common indicator of social capital is membership in informal and formal associations. Social capital in a community is discernible through collective management of resources (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000: 16). NGO income generating projects have utilized the social networks of the poor and the value of community obligations while providing group-based loans. The routine and rituals the members have to follow to obtain such loans, the regular interaction with NGO employees and other members for loan repayment, the group effort towards the loan management, all facilitate exchanges within the community that result in more effective use of the micro-credit programs (Larance, 1998:2). There are enough studies (Larance, 1998; Dowla, 2005) that confirm the positive relationship between social capital and economic performance in micro-credit and social capital but relatively little attention has been paid to non-formal education programs.

The enrollment in non-formal schools also provides the poorest of the poor the access not only to learning, but also to interaction with each other on a regular basis. For children from poor households the school often becomes the social space, where they strengthen the bonds with their playmates. These ties will grow stronger over the years, as these pupils become contributing members of the community. Education is not only one of the components of social capital, but the method of imparting education itself can foster the development of trust in collective action for the students. Most of the NGO schools promote more informal student-centered classrooms where students are encouraged to participate in daily lessons. The small classroom size, the personal relationship with the teacher, who is always from that community, the curricula closer to lived experiences, all foster a fertile environment for mutual trust and solidarity. Along with the economic benefits, social capital has also been credited with solving collective action problems of distribution of

irrigation water, forest management, and reduction of crime in the neighborhood (Dowla, 2005:3). This might be an appropriate time to recognize the potential of the non-formal education system in Bangladesh and how the social capital accumulated through these schools can counter the growing fundamentalism that is being kindled in selected *madrassahs* of Bangladesh.

From Privilege to Right: Public Education

Education in Bangladesh, as in the other parts of the subcontinent, was mostly accessible to the privileged few, with some government and charity-based institutions which fed into the illusion of the existence of a public education system. Girls, children living in rural areas and urban slums, children from poor households, and minorities were always underrepresented at all levels of educational institutions (Chowdhury et al, 2003: 604). Because of the persistent class hierarchy, individual patronage in education was not uncommon and primary education in Bangladesh was always a mish-mash of public (based on local taxes) and private (often religious) schools. In spite of the commitment towards comprehensive and compulsory primary education after liberation, subsequent policies and institutions were slow to emerge and the government policy on education was mostly a combination of demand-based ad hoc packages.

Neither the British nor the Pakistan government had ever committed sufficient funding for primary education; 58.4 percent of the school age population in the pre-1971 era was dependent on primary schools built by local taxes or philanthropic individuals. The 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh established the responsibility of the State to provide education to all its citizens (Unterhaler et al, 2003: 88). By 1973, 36,165 primary schools were nationalized and the national administration took over the financial responsibility of such schools. After liberation, primary enrollments registered a sharp rise, but settled down to pre-nationalization levels within a few years, and were stagnant until the late 1980s. There was also a rise of private schools in major cities that cater to children of the rich and the upper-middle-class, non-formal schools operated by the NGOs in rural areas or urban slums as extensions of various development projects, and *madrassahs* run by either social organizations or individual donors. As national educational policy and supporting institutions emerged, the government, for the most part, let all these different types of schools manage their curricula and pedagogy with limited supervision. While universal public education remained a political priority, the

development budget allocation remained low during much of the 1980s (Hossain, 2004: 1).

For the first decade after independence, most of the government initiatives to expand education were locked up in the planning phase, and once again it was either the individuals or NGOs that established numerous schools, mostly to impart primary education. Although the government lagged behind in formulating a national policy on education, the spirit of socio-economic development and self-reliance in the post-liberation era resulted in various child and adult literacy programs. By the mid-1980s a number of large NGOs established their schools and succeeded in enrolling more than a million children in primary schools. With their non-formal methods and interactive classroom pedagogies, they established a parallel structure to public education, especially at the primary level (Unterhaler et al, 2003: 90).

The military regime of General Ershad passed legislation to universalize primary education in 1981. The legal basis for compulsory primary education (Compulsory Primary Education Act of 1990) and a range of policies did establish new schools in upazillas and did improve access to primary education. The government also established various national bodies and committees to deal with different aspects of education, but most of these programs were donor-funded and thus left out the broader section of existing education researchers and practitioners. The government attempted to reach more children through the donor-aided food for education programme, and in 1993 an estimated 2.2 million children from selected poor families received 15-20 kg of wheat every month in return for school attendance. Along with these attempts, satellite and community schools were established in underserved communities. Textbooks were made free and aggressive campaigns were being launched to encourage families to send girls to schools. NGOs continued to cater to more than 8 percent of children at the primary level, loosely based on government curricula, with the aim to eventually enrol these children into mainstream schools (Unterhaler et al, 2003: 91-92). The recent concerns about education have to do not only with access to education, particularly for hard to reach children, but also with quality, in terms of curricula and pedagogy (Unterhaler et al, 2003: 87). In 1992, the Bangladesh government replaced the old content-based curricula with a more inspiring and imaginative one. At present, primary education is free

for all children in government schools, and for rural girls, it is free up to grade ten (Nath and Chowdhury, 2002: 78).

The government run schools provide primary education to two-thirds of the students enrolled in schools. 15 percent of the students are enrolled in non-government primary schools, 8.5 percent are studying in NGO-operated non-formal schools, 5.9 percent in *madrassahs* (Aliyah *madrassahs*, which are under the *Madrassaah* Education Board), and 2.9 percent in other types. There are no reliable statistics about the number of students enrolled in Deobandhi *madrassahs*, which are not under the *Madrassah* Education Board. The adult literacy rate has increased from 34.6 percent in 1990 to 51.2 percent in 1998 (Nath and Chowdhury, 2002: 78-79). The full cost of government primary and secondary schools is borne by the Bangladesh government. The government also pays 90 percent of base teacher salaries to non-government registered schools. Students in both government and non-government registered schools receive free textbooks (Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2001: 5). Nevertheless, the Bangladesh government spends much lower proportion of its gross national product (only 2.2 percent in 1997/98) for education and the bulk of it is for the salary of teachers, leaving less for quality-enhancing activities (Chowdhury et al, 2003: 604).

From Philanthropy to Foot Soldiers: *Madrassahs*

The creation of educational or social institutions is a part of the power struggle to establish, expand, and sustain a particular notion of truth through legitimacy. Muslims in the Indian subcontinent encountered modernity through colonization, which stripped their political power and questioned the legitimacy of their cultural and educational institutions. The establishment of a parallel education system in British India undercut the power base of the *madrassahs.* Colonization also changed the objectives of education in *madrassahs* from achieving bliss in the afterlife to defending the faith against colonial infiltration. Education sought to conserve and transmit traditions and accepted dogma. Pedagogy was based on memorization, which strengthened the value of authority. Hence while the mission of *madrassah* education changed during the colonial period, its content and pedagogy remained the same (Talbani, 1996: 72-73).

The rise of madrasah education for the poor and even middle-class Bengali Muslim population was also a result of the policies of the British Raj.

Unlike Muslims in northern India who were at par with Hindus in English education, Bengali Muslims, who mostly lived in rural areas, had little access to English schools and colleges in urban areas and lacked the means to support the educational expenses for their sons (Rahim, 1992: 312). Deprived of the advantages of being part of the middle-class and without urban connections, Bengali Muslim peasants could do little to educate their children. The peasants and the emerging rich farmers, the *jotdar*, began to show an interest in English education only after the amendment of the permanent settlement system, which allowed the farmers the benefits of their surplus agricultural products (Rahim, 1992: 317). Although there was a realization that even a rudimentary education helped the cultivator examine his records and protected him from exploitation by the *zamindar's* agents, large-scale primary education for Muslim students did not occur until the end of the 19th century, with *madrassahs* operating alongside to absorb mostly the poorest of the poor.

There are approximately 64,000 *madrassahs* in Bangladesh, of which only 7,122 *madrassahs* are registered Aliyah *madrassahs* (1999 estimate). The Aliyah *madrassahs* are under the auspices of the *Madrassah* Education Board and teach English, Mathematics, Science, and History along with Arabic, Religious Theory, and other Islamic subjects. Students graduating from the Aliyah *madrassahs* are eligible for higher education or employment in the private or public sector. The more traditional Deobandhi-style *madrassahs* are independent of government control and focus on Religious studies and hence the graduating students remain unqualified for mainstream occupations (Lintner, 2002: 3). The Deobandhis had actually emerged in British India as a progressive reform movement but this movement is now associated with rigid interpretations of Islam. In 1978 the government set up the "*Madrassah* Education Board" to standardize the curricula, examinations, and most importantly, to create opportunities for *madrassah* students to enter universities. "Islamiat," a course on Islamic studies, was made mandatory at primary and secondary levels for all Muslim students (Riaz, 2003: 311).

The *madrassahs* traditionally were funded by local elites with a religious disposition. Since the 1980s, the major source for the funding of such *madrassahs* are the large sums of remittances coming from the Gulf States. The Bangladeshi workers working in the Middle East undergo economic advancement as well religious rejuvenation while they work in the Middle-East for a long span of years. Often, donating funds for

madrassahs becomes a commonly used method to elevate the social status of returning expatriates. Their indoctrination in more rigid interpretations of Islam in the Middle East without doubt plays a prominent role in setting the pedagogy and curricula of the *madrassahs.* Along with their new economic power, the donors are also able to exercise considerable social control over the community through these *madrassahs.* The social implications of such remittances in Bangladesh have become a focus of study in recent years.

The outlook of the *madrassah* students differs considerably from students of other educational institutions. Almost all the members of student groups who strive to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh, such as the *Islami Chhatra Shibir,* are products of *madrassahs*. Each privately run *madrassah* is comprised of a committee that includes local influential and wealthy residents. These committees are self-appointed guardians of Islamic values in their respective localities. In 1984, one *madrassah* committee in Khulna district thwarted a cultural show in a marketplace near the *madrassah* (Huque and Akhter, 1987: 213). Many *madrassahs* have free boarding houses, where the students can reside and receive food free of charge. Most *madrassah* students come from poor families and due to financial constraints cannot even complete their education. An incomplete education results in confused values, wrong verdicts and rigid interpretations of Islamic norms (Huque and Akhter, 1987: 213-214).

From Social Service to Social Capital: NGO Schools

NGOs in Bangladesh were bred in a war-ravaged environment to promote self-help; over the years, their mission has expanded from creating income avenues to community development. After directing all attention towards economic development, social injustice, and gender parity over two decades, NGOs have adopted the political empowerment of their clientele as one of their missions since the 1990s. NGOs, in general, had begun supporting mass movements to oust the military regime of General Ershad, and continued to address political issues ranging from promoting voter awareness to assisting their clients to run for local offices.

The vast NGO community in Bangladesh has embraced the concept of civil society as part of their own quest for identity and legitimacy (Lewis, 2004: 300). In a weak and ineffectual state, NGOs have spearheaded the process of forming social capital (Mondal, 2000: 460). NGOs claim themselves as the authentic voice of the poor, and voters' education programs to educate and mobilize the poor for rational electoral choice is

not uncommon. A few NGOs (GSS and SAMATA) have taken a step further, by getting their members elected in local government. NGOs have long been working for the economic empowerment of the rural poor and the link between economic development and exclusion from societal and political power has not gone unnoticed. In the 1990s, most of the major NGOs included voter education, leadership training, and dialogue with political parties in their mandates. In the elections of 1996, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) coordinated a democracy awareness education program throughout the country and succeeded in raising the voter turnout to an impressive 74 percent (Lewis, 2004: 310).

The NGO-run schools, in general, began as expansions to other awareness building projects, but most of the major NGOs now promote non-formal primary education as one of their core programs. One of the most successful and most expansive non-formal education programs is offered by BRAC, a leading NGOs in Bangladesh. BRAC started its Non-Formal Primary Education Program (NFPE) in 1985 as a 3-year program for children between the ages of 8 and 10 years. They targeted students who had never attended school or had dropped out from formal schools with the goal to enrol NFPE graduates in government schools. NFPE has evolved into a 4-year program covering primary curricula from grades 1 to 5. The Basic Education for Older Children (BEOC) is 3-year schools for adolescents, from 11 to 14 years of age. Both schools provide free textbooks and other materials.

BRAC schools have certain characteristics that set these apart from government schools. The schoolhouse is usually rented, close to the home of students. The class sizes are small, ranging from 30 to 33 students. Both programs specifically target girls and 70 percent of the BRAC school children are female. Around 97 percent of the teachers in BRAC schools are women, who are local residents. The teachers must have at least 9 years of schooling and have to undergo extensive training that recurs every year. The BRAC curricula have been tailored to suit the needs of their served population, children of the poor and landless, and hence first-generation recipient of education. As more than 90 percent of the BRAC graduates continue on in the formal system, the curricula incorporate competencies set out by the government for formal primary schools. A learner-centered participatory approach is encouraged in BRAC schools. The NFPE curricula consist of lessons in Bangla, Mathematics, and Social Studies. English is taught from grade 2; the 4^{th} and 5^{th} grade students follow

government textbooks. BRAC is expanding its educational outreach program to hard-to-reach children and to children of workers in the garment industries. It has also started pre-primary programs for young learners and 11 formal schools (Nath, Sylvia, and Grimes, 1999: 8).

BRAC's education program can be distinguished from the formal system in numerous ways: the class size is only 33, parent-teacher meetings are held regularly, school hours are fixed each season with the advice of the parents, and there is regular training and supervision which coexists with a decentralized management of the school system. In contrast, formal schools have a centralized uniform system with almost double theclass-size, almost no involvement of parents, and weak management and supervision systems. The curricula in BRAC schools are broadly based on the formal government curricula but very much related to rural lives in Bangladesh (Nath, Sylvia, and Grimes, 1999: 8-9).

The targeting of programs to girls, children from poor families, and school dropouts appears to have introduced the idea that education is universal right, whereas in the past it was considered a prerogative of those who could afford it. In addition to such benefits as access to modern-sector jobs and higher-status occupations, schooling is now perceived as a necessity even for the poor rural child. Recent expansion of NGO programs has succeeded in carrying the message about the benefits of gaining at least minimal literacy. In most cases, BRAC schools have performed on a par with government schools although students who attend government schools are better off socio-economically (Hossain, Nath, and Chowdhury, 2002: 62).

Reaching the Students: A Comparison of Different Pedagogies

The success of such NGO schools is probably rooted in their education content as well as their delivery mechanism. The classroom practices of government primary schools have tendered to generate and reinforced traditional values and practices such as teacher-centered approaches, absence of pre-reading activities, and lack of general involvement of students (Imam and Khan, 1998: 1). Students in non-formal education schools perform better in basic competencies than in government schools (Siddique, 2004: 4). NGOs have 90 percent attendance rate compared to 66 percent at government schools, and 90 percent of the students graduate from non-formal schools compared to 46 percent students from government schools (Siddique, 2004: 4).

The Bangladesh government allows NGOs to experiment with a variety of delivery mechanism and non-formal education has been accepted as a complementary approach to formal education. Since the time demand in the schools seem to be a major factor in enrollment, the schedules for BRAC schools are set after consulting with parents. There is no examination in BRAC schools; the assessment is conducted through continuous evaluation of students. The curricula are student-centered, which includes role-playing, dancing, and singing. Compared to 90 percent female teachers in BRAC schools, the percentage of female teachers in government schools is 28 percent.

The Bangladesh government has replicated some of the mechanisms adopted by non-formal schools in their school incentive programs, which are joint ventures between the Bangladesh government and donor agencies. In Food-for- Education (FFE) poor families receive wheat when their children attend primary school. The World Bank funded Secondary School Scholarship Program (SSSP), which is available to all girls who attend secondary schools. Girls are paid a small monthly cash stipend and all of their school fees are waived. In return, they have to regularly attend classes and their parents must commit not to marry them off before the age of 18 (Arends-Kuenning and Amin, 2004: 296).

The entry of NGOs in primary education has significantly increased the enrollment of girl students due to the high percentage of female teachers and the involvement of parents (Sukontamarn, 2004:1). NGO involvement in the education sector was triggered by the failure of the state. Nationally representative data from the Education Watch Project shows that, in 1998, the gender gap in primary enrollment in favor of boys existed only in urban households. Girls from rural poor households- in particular, girls from rural BRAC target households- have a notably higher enrollment rate than boys (Sukontamarn, 2004:3).

Instead of operating through a uniform system like the Bangladesh Education Board, the NGO schools remain autonomous and fairly flexible within certain parameter. Since they focus on smaller classrooms, more contact with the teacher, and the lived realities of the poor students in designing their curricula, the success rate of non-formal schools both in enrollment and in graduation exceeds that of government schools. The quality of the textbooks used by the BRAC schools is also an indication as of why children are motivated to go to and stay in those schools. The following table summarizes some of the notable differences among the textbooks used in grade V in the three school systems.

A Comparison of the Social Studies Textbook for grade V

	Bangladesh Education Board	*Madrassah* Education Board	BRAC
Length	128 pages	98 pages	142 pages
Sections	14	11	15
Visuals	Poor quality visuals; 29 black & white pictures	Poor quality visuals; 14 black & white pictures	Excellent visuals; 52 colored pictures
Geography	4 sections (38 pages)	4 sections (29 pages)	4 sections (65 pages)
History	1 section (23 pages)	6 sections (65 pages); the 1st section, the longest one (24 pages), is about the life of Prophet Muhammad.	2 sections (23pages)
Civics	2 sections (9 pages)	1 section (7 pages)	2 sections (13 pages)
Focus on national issues	3 sections (22 pages)	None	4 sections (27 pages)
Focus on local issues	1 section (6 pages)	None	1 section (7 pages)
Focus on international issues	2 sections (15 pages)	None	2 sections (12 pages)
Maps	6 maps depicting administrative divisions, industry, transportation, agriculture, forestry, and population distribution; 1 map of Asia and 1 of the Indian subcontinent	4 maps depicting land, rivers, industry, and population distribution	3 exercises to learn to draw the map of Bangladesh; 3 maps depicting administrative divisions (with exercises to identify the locality of the students), 4 maps for agriculture; 2 for industry; 4 for transportation; 1 for natural resources; 1 for forestry; and 1 for population distribution; 2 maps of the Indian subcontinent
Exercises	1 exercise at the end of each section; 4-6 questions in each exercise	1 exercise at the end of each section; 2-4 questions in each exercise	Exercises blended in each of the sections; 6-9 questions in each exercise
Print quality	Newsprint	Newsprint	Better paper and printing quality

Conclusion

The plurality of the education system in Bangladesh has been more of a boon than a bane, but the Bangladesh government is yet to recognize the potential for developing social capital through the education system. As

the mainstream public education remains detached from the lived reality of the poor, it has contributed very little to transform literacy into awareness and motivate students to initiate community endeavors. The *madrassah* education system does recognize the collective power of its students, but because of its narrow interpretation of social ends, most of its energy is directed towards fighting cultural changes, especially those regarding gender norms in society. In this context, NGO schools seem to be the only avenue where education can lead to a broader awareness about society, cohesive efforts to take charge of issues, and political participation at the local level. The growth of alternative education is indeed a challenge for the fundamentalist groups, who were the traditional patrons of the *madrassahs*. Since NGO schools are invariably aligned with other programs to mobilize social consciousness, they have successfully carved out an alternate public space for the poor. It is far from coincidental that most of the NGO programs that have been attacked by fundamentalist groups are related to literacy and education programs.

Although the NGO schools reach only a little over 8 percent of school-going children, the number of NGO schools is increasing. The rising number of madrassahs is also keeping up with that pace. The recent simultaneous bombing of all but one district headquarters indicates that the Bangladesh government is struggling in its clash with the fundamentalist power. The battle against fundamentalism has to be fought at the grassroots levels to annihilate the very base of the fundamentalists' support. NGO schools offer a viable alternative to the inadequate public education and deficient *madrassah* education. The issue of social capital in relation to the NGOs is already being discussed in Bangladesh, but the potential of non-formal education is often missing from that discussion. NGOs should take full advantage of the multiplicity of the education system in Bangladesh and direct their efforts to even better transform all of their literacy and education programs into viable social capital.

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