



FAITH AND EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: A REVIEW OF THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Relationships between religious beliefs, institutions, educational strategies, and delivery pose practical challenges for policymakers in Bangladesh. Challenges range from coordination of different systems for purposes of employment credentials, equity, and quality assurance to fundamental questions about the values that underlie curricula. A related challenge involves national objectives to instill shared civic values through education and to address mounting intergroup tensions. This review describes and analyzes faith-inspired education providers in Bangladesh, particularly Islamic madrasas and Catholic schools. The aim is to build constructively on the legacies of religious contributions to education, address both articulated and unarticulated tensions, and identify ways in which contemporary innovations among religiously inspired education providers contribute to broader national education goals.

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INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh today confronts vexed questions as to the meaning and importance of its diverse heritage and its implications for the country's political and cultural ethos. The nation prides itself on its position at the intersection of trade routes, religious identities, and political ideologies. Bangladesh's historical roots extend back to the prehistoric era. As a land formation in the world's largest delta, Bangladesh has long been an agricultural hub that attracted laborers, mercenaries, pirates, preachers, and colonial imperialists. The region was a major center for Buddhist learning in the subcontinent well before Hindu and Muslim political and cultural powers emerged on the scene. The consequent mingling of different religions, cultures, and schools of thought fostered a distinctive diversity (linguistic, cultural, and religiopolitical) that marked the economic, cultural, and political institutions that flourished in Bengal. Complexities arising from great diversity have colored legacies of different historic eras, notably colonization by the British, economic and cultural marginalization by the Pakistani state, and the violent birth of the Bangladeshi nation. These complexities also shape contemporary economic policies, political and cultural priorities, governing structures and imperatives, and relationships among religious communities.

Bangladeshi leaders espouse secularism as a political doctrine that ensures that the state will be neutral towards all religions. However, Islam is granted, in effect, the position of the state religion. Many see this as a contradiction that ultimately challenges practices that promote tolerance and diversity, but successive governments have justified the juxtaposition of secularism with a majority religion granted a primacy status as forming a nation-state that takes into consideration its historical heritage without depriving anyone of their rights or rightful place. Bangladesh's struggle to find equilibrium between cultural distinctions, such as Bengali Muslim versus Muslim Bengali and Bengali versus indigenous people, is nonetheless visible in institutional settings. This struggle is displayed prominently within the state's educational apparatus.

The nation's historical vicissitudes have resulted in today's education system: large and complex, where different education providers, both secular and religious, collaborate and compete for the market and constituents. Unanswered questions and sometimes fractious debates pivot around different groups' vision of education and their differing modes of delivery. In the mosaic of multiple providers and visions, questions about values have evoked particular reflections in recent years. This results from necessities inherent in a fast-developing nation like Bangladesh, whose economic growth demands disrupting shifts in society that inevitably affect cultural practices and social norms. Complicating factors include the divisive religious nationalisms in South Asia and globally, persecution of minority religions in and outside national boundaries, threats of religiously linked violence, and the appetite of some, especially youth, for radical ideas and acts of terror. These debates and events have sparked reflections about values that involve local and global forces and links. Many are linked to religious institutions and beliefs, and, given the deep-rooted and complex faith dimensions of education in Bangladesh, education is a pivotal topic.

Bangladesh's educational challenges involve explicit and implicit issues that relate to society's ethics and, notably, religious and moral values. This is both because religious communities run significant educational institutions (above all Islamic and Catholic) and because of expectations that the national and especially the public education system will impart values at least in part through religious teaching. From a purely educational perspective, Bangladesh's faith and education landscape sits very much in the center of several broader global policy issues such as the negotiation between state control and autonomy of religious education providers, modernization of curriculum, quality of teaching and learning, and debates around diversity and inclusion. With its four major religious traditions, which are all involved in the provision of education to differing degrees,¹ Bangladesh also provides a unique opportunity to explore how these

different actors and providers address the questions of diversity, inclusion, modernization, and secularism in the day-to-day teaching and learning processes.

This review focuses on the underlying question of the extent to which the education system (in all its complexity) provides young people with a foundation of values that are essential for a productive society. The aim is to contribute to a general understanding of the faith-linked education landscape in Bangladesh, about which knowledge is incomplete. The parallel streams of education that are a feature of Bangladesh often seem to have little relation to one another, with few mechanisms that reinforce core understandings and values that apply across religious divides. This review seeks to identify innovative approaches to religious education that acknowledge and embrace Bangladesh's religious diversity but also offer pathways towards common themes. Thus, it includes brief case studies on institutions that seek to make religious education inclusive and pluralistic through the content, scope, or framework of education delivery. This review focuses on ways in which religious diversity is addressed in modern and secular Bangladesh within the religious educational frameworks and on pertinent gaps.

The review has five substantive parts (plus an introduction and conclusion). The following section provides a broad overview of Bangladesh's education system, outlining major achievements and challenges and reviewing the distinct streams of education delivered by religious institutions. Four subsequent sections correspond respectively to the four major religions of Bangladesh—Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism—and each explore the major faith-inspired organizations (FIOs) offering education under the aegis of that religious tradition. Each engages with the debates surrounding sub-systems of religious education, highlighting the distinctive challenges involved.

The topic of faith and education is particularly relevant now in the context of Bangladesh for several reasons:

- Debates since 2013 over the meaning and significance of secularism
- The emergence of Hefajat e Islam as an important political group with negotiating power
- Use of madrasa students for political gains in recent times
- The emergence and expansion of homegrown and globally connected terrorism
- Pope Francis' 2017 visit to Bangladesh that highlighted religious tensions from a regional perspective
- The expansion of the Hindutva movement in India and tension over the work of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and Ramakrishna Mission in Bangladesh
- The Rohingya influx in the Chittagong region and tensions around Buddhist-Muslim relationships in Myanmar and Bangladesh
- State recognition of unregistered Quomi madrasas' highest degree, Dawrah Hadith, as equivalent to a master's degree in 2018
- The government of Bangladesh's current review of the curriculum to produce more inclusive textbooks for children by 2021

The review represents a collaborative effort by the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and BRAC University's Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ), in collaboration with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, to address religious dimensions of Bangladesh's development agenda. The project's breadth makes possible a focus on diversity within one

tradition but offers comparison across major religious traditions, as well as between the secular state and religious actors. Several data collection methods were used to prepare this review including content analysis, qualitative in-depth interviews, and case studies. Given the wide scope of Bangladesh's faith-based education sector, it does not purport to address all probable descriptions and analyses. The main goal is to provide readers a roadmap for further research and analysis by identifying the main actors, providers, and stakeholders of faith and education in Bangladesh and to highlight pressing issues that faith-based education organizations face.

BANGLADESH'S EDUCATION SYSTEMS, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND CHALLENGES

The past two decades have seen remarkable progress in education in Bangladesh, largely the result of policy interventions that include successful public-private partnerships and various subsidy programs. Net primary enrollment in 2015 was nearly universal (98%), compared to 80% in 2000. Secondary school enrolment increased to 54% in 2015 from 45% in 2000.² Socioeconomic disparities between the highest and lowest economic classes at both the primary and secondary levels have been sharply reduced, and there is near gender parity.

While access to schooling has seen success, a central challenge today is to ensure that enrolled children learn foundational skills at schools. Recent assessments of children's learning at different grade levels have revealed dire conditions for functional learning in Bangladeshi schools. For example, a 2018 assessment by Save the Children found that 44% of first graders were unable to read their first word.³ The assessment report also found that 27% of third grade students failed to read with comprehension.⁴ The situation improves marginally at the secondary level but only 25 to 44% of secondary level students in Grades 5 to 8 showed satisfactory level mastery in reading comprehension and math skills.⁵ Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to rank even lower in these assessments. In addition, significant quality gaps remain between rural and urban schools. The teaching force is often under-trained and under-resourced across the grade levels. While recent curriculum reforms have sought to incorporate creative learning and teaching, rote learning and memorization are still celebrated as the primary learning methods, as opposed to lasting competencies, analytical skills, and critical thinking. The public examination system has lost credibility in recent years with the prevalence of leaked question papers. The government spends only 2% on education as a share of the gross domestic product, the second lowest in South Asia, and lower than in most other countries at similar levels of development. Curricular and administrative issues contribute to high dropout and grade repetition rates: 20% of all primary school enrolled students do not finish their fifth grade, and only 50% of first graders go on to finish their Grade 10 education. Nearly five million children are still out-of-reach or have prematurely dropped out of schools, largely due to the opportunity cost.⁶

Poor learning outcomes dampen national growth prospects since poor literacy and numeracy skills inhibit employability and productivity in a knowledge-based society. With a large youth population, only 4% of the Bangladeshi workforce of 87 million have greater than a secondary education. Studies indicate that Bangladesh's higher education and training programs are inadequate to produce skilled graduates for present and future labor markets. Wide gender disparities at the tertiary level (only 66 women are enrolled in higher education for every 100 men) limit opportunities for salaried and more permanent jobs. These

deficiencies come alongside the important challenges of preparing future citizens and imparting core civic values. In short, the sector overall faces significant challenges as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 01
Major Challenges of Bangladesh's Education System

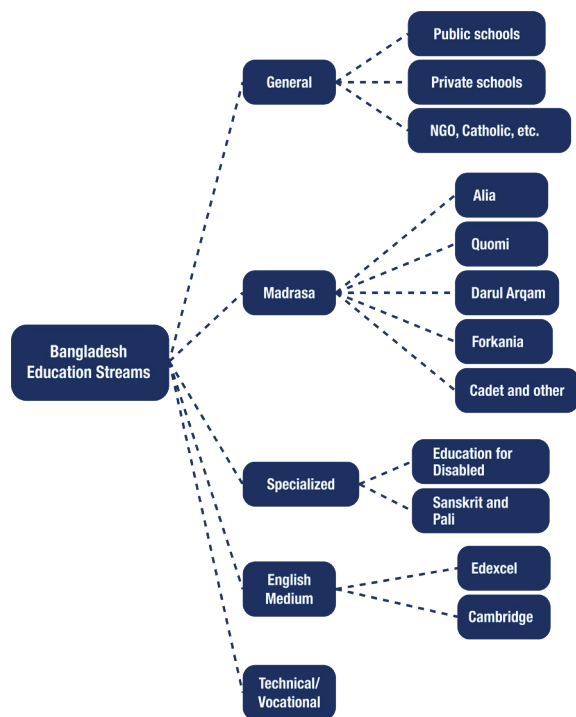
Major Challenges	
Educational Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% of all primary school enrolled students do not finish Grade 5 • 5 million children are still out-of-reach or have prematurely dropped out of schools • Only 66 women are enrolled in higher education for every 100 men in Bangladesh
Education Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 44% of students who finish Grade 1 are unable to read their first word • 27% of Grade 3 students cannot read with comprehension
Finance and Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government spends only 2% on education as a share of the gross domestic product, the second lowest in South Asia • Inequality among urban and rural schools

Source: BANBEIS, 2018⁷

The complex education system of Bangladesh serves more than 35 million students and involves more than 25 types of school providers offering education from pre-primary to secondary levels, with 10 examination boards. Based on the curriculum offered, providers can be grouped under three main streams: (a) public and private schools and madrasas that follow the national curriculum; (b) unregistered and autonomous Quomi madrasas that follow Deobandi curricula; and (c) schools that follow a British curriculum. Primary education under the national stream comprises Grades 1 to 5, and secondary education spans Grades 6 to 12. The medium of instruction, as well as textbooks used under the national curriculum, is solely Bangla in public schools and can be either or both Bangla and English in private schools. Some madrasa education is taught in Arabic.

Governance and approach vary within the different streams. Government-funded Alia madrasas follow a hybrid model that teaches both secular and religious subjects simultaneously, from primary to secondary levels. Quomi madrasas have specific education boards and are not regulated by the government. These community-based madrasas mostly follow orthodox Deobandi traditions found primarily across the Indian subcontinent. Many Quomi madrasas have recently begun to teach secular subjects such as Bangla and English language and literature, mathematics, and social sciences. However, as the Quomi boards are highly decentralized and differ from one another, how many Quomi madrasas teach secular subjects is not known systematically. Schools that follow British curricula, locally known as English-medium schools, are privately-run urban schools that usually offer elementary to higher secondary level education to children from middle and upper middle-class families. Similarly to the English-medium schools, kindergarten

FIGURE 01
Bangladesh Education Streams and Subsections



schools have mushroomed in the last decade in both urban and semi-urban locations. These usually for-profit schools provide pre-primary to primary level education and follow a hybrid curriculum combining books from both public streams as well as private markets. Figure 1 summarizes the major education streams and their subsections in the Bangladeshi context.

This extensive and centralized system is primarily overseen by three government ministries: the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) that is responsible for both formal and nonformal pre-primary to primary education; the Ministry of Education (MoE) administers secondary, tertiary, technical, vocational, and mainstream madrasa education; and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), which oversees mosque- and temple-based nonformal as well as informal education programs. In addition, the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) oversees several schools for the disabled, and the Ministry of Commerce (MoC) is responsible for kindergarten schools. The NGO Affairs Bureau, a regulatory institute under

the prime minister's office that oversees NGO activities in Bangladesh, has responsibility for oversight of NGO-run schools and learning centers.

A large body of religious as well as non-religious education institutions operate beyond the purview of the government. Quomi madrasas are generally independently managed and locally funded while offering Islamic education for free or for a minimal cost, making them a popular option to parents. English-medium schools are not registered under any government agencies in Bangladesh, and the number of these schools countrywide is unknown. Similarly, there is no data on how many kindergarten schools⁸ operate since most of these schools are unregistered.

Some basic statistics on the overall education system in Bangladesh are provided in Table 2.

The public education system of Bangladesh delivers a blend of secular and religious education in primary and secondary levels. Secular subjects range from Bangla and English literature and languages, mathematics, natural sciences, to social sciences. Students from the four major religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity) are taught religion as a compulsory subject separately through standardized textbooks from Grades 3 to 10. Each student adhering to one of the four major religions is to study their respective textbooks only. There is no provision for religious education in the national curriculum for children who do not adhere to one of the four major religions. Moreover, the system offers no institutionalized interreligious/interfaith learning opportunities. Due to a severe shortage of skilled teachers in Bangladesh's primary and secondary schools, religion, especially for minority religions, is often taught by other subject teachers of the same faith who are not formally trained to teach religious subjects. In hard-to-reach areas where teacher absenteeism is high, these subjects are commonly omitted altogether. In other cases, students sit in other religion classes or roam outside of the school; communities may see this as a form of religious disenfranchisement. Table 3 shows overall numbers of students with different religious identities.

TABLE 02**Number of Institutions, Students, and Teachers by Type of Education**

	Management		Number of Teachers			Number of Students		
Type of Education		Number of Institutions	Total	Female	% Female	Total	Female	% Female
Primary Education	Public	65,529	348,867	223,810	64.15	13,034,723	6,609,907	50.71
	Private	134,147	336,533	202,841	60.27	4,303,377	2,189,126	50.87
	Total	134,147	685,400	426,651	62.25	17,338,100	8,799,033	50.75
Secondary Education	Public	663	13,006	3,824	29.40	660,844	295,131	44.66
	Private	19,802	221,159	56,246	25.43	9,814,256	5,360,250	54.62
	Total	20,465	234,165	60,070	25.65	10,475,100	1,368,474	55.38
Madrasa Education (Alia)	Public	3	60	0	0	6,714	726	10.81
	Private	9,291	109,858	14,642	13.33	2,471,248	1,368,474	55.38
	Total	9,294	109,918	14,642	13.32	2,477,962	1,369,200	55.26

Source: BANBEIS, 2018⁹**TABLE 03****Number of Students by Religion**

Religion	Class 6		Class 7		Class 8		Class 9		Class 10	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
Muslim	2,105,888	1,145,433	2,106,581	1,162,665	2,078,538	1,138,198	1,503,179	808,219	1,531,438	812,935
Hindu	236,490	121,807	229,603	119,516	220,531	113,784	175,100	89,837	169,290	86,487
Christian	9,946	4,566	10,014	4,816	10,903	5,039	7,107	3,287	7,052	3,136
Buddhist	16,032	7,616	16,267	7,945	17,628	8,653	11,334	5,696	12,179	5,746
Total	2,368,356	1,279,422	2,362,465	1,294,942	2,327,600	1,265,674	1,696,720	907,039	1,719,959	908,304

Source: BANBEIS, 2018¹⁰

Education Delivered by Religious Institutions

The roles and contributions of FIOs in Bangladesh's multifaceted education system are visible and diverse but understudied, and discourse about them often lacks nuance. Today's system has deep and varying historical roots. Each of the four major religious traditions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity), along with indigenous folk traditions, historically valued and prioritized teaching and learning for children, particularly from poor and marginalized households, prior to the advent of formal public education. Surveys conducted in the colonial period suggest that community-based elementary schools flourished until the first few decades of the nineteenth century.¹¹ William Adam, a British minister and missionary, conducted a three year-long survey from 1835 to 1838 on schools in Bengal and Bihar, which found that more than 100,000 community-run schools existed in rural areas.¹² Mostly run by Hindu and Muslim clergy and artisans, these schools offered education in vernacular languages, focused on experiential learning methodologies, presented a wide range of learning subjects and skills, and were oriented to specific careers. Although Adam's survey reports made no mention of schools for female children, historical evidence suggests that Muslim women were often able to learn bookkeeping and property laws on their own.¹³ These schools welcomed students from diverse social and religious classes and castes, as opposed to the English-medium schools which the British established and ran that primarily served students from Hindu upper castes.

Most of the indigenous and community-run vernacular schools could not be sustained in the face of British policies that favored English-medium schools.¹⁴ This paradigm shift marginalized Muslim students who placed value on Persian and Urdu languages as the medium of instruction and were unwilling to participate in the state-backed secular education system. Consequently, a group of prominent Indian Muslim scholars (ulama) established a separate educational movement in the North Indian town of Deoband. Deobandi madrasas followed a flexible Quran- and hadith-based curriculum called Dars-i-Nizami. By the end of the nineteenth century, Muslim associations were demanding state education in vernacular languages. The colonial government passed a Resolution on Muslim Education in 1871 in recognition of the poor state of education among Muslims of Bengal that offered several affirmative actions for improving the participation of Muslim children in the national education system.¹⁵ When colonial rule ended in 1947, rising nationalism paved the way for universal primary education policy in both East (present-day Bangladesh) and West Pakistan. After independence in 1971, Bangladesh carried on the colonial legacy of a secular national curriculum where other types of education streams also ran in parallel.

In contemporary Bangladesh, faith-inspired education institutions, especially orthodox madrasas, have commonly come under scrutiny with calls for reforms. Some Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian schools have earned reputations as some of the country's finest, while some are clearly of poor quality. With the great diversity of faith-inspired and secular education, information about them could enrich the understanding of issues and opportunities for the education sector. The landscape of faith and education is described in more detail in the following sections.

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ISLAM AND EDUCATION

The history of Islamic education in present-day Bangladesh is as old as the history of Islam in the delta itself. The region's first Muslim ruler, Bakhtiyar Khilji, established some *maktabs* (elementary schools) and madrasas along with mosques and *khankahs* (shrines/places for spiritual counseling) in what is now northern Bangladesh in the thirteenth century.¹⁶ Madrasas have been major education providers for the Muslim population in Bengal ever since. During the British colonial rule, state-enforced attempts to reform traditional Islamic education brought significant change within the 80,000 recognized madrasas of Bengal and neighboring states at the time.¹⁷ Madrasas have a large and growing presence in primary and secondary education in contemporary Bangladesh. In 2009, madrasas accounted for an estimated 13.8% of school enrollment at the primary level and about 21% in secondary enrollment.¹⁸

Madrasa System in Bangladesh

Madrasa education in Bangladesh runs parallel to the mainstream secular education system, with some crossovers between the two. Bangladeshi madrasas are broadly grouped under two categories: madrasas under the purview of the government's Madrasa Education Board, the Alia madrasas, and autonomous Quomi madrasas. Other types of madrasas include Nurani madrasas, Furqania/Hafizia madrasas, and cadet madrasas that also run with no government recognition and regulation. The madrasa system of Bangladesh has experienced significant growth at various times since independence. Today, the system is one of the world's largest.

Madrasas in Bangladesh are almost entirely established and managed by non-state actors. Only three madrasas are completely state funded. There is no consensus on the actual number of privately run madrasas due to their largely unregulated nature and lack of any comprehensive survey. This is reflected in the wide ranges quoted when estimating numbers of Alia and Quomi madrasas, as critiqued by Asadullah,¹⁹ and in the number of students purportedly attending these institutions. Table 4 illustrates varied estimates.

TABLE 04

Number of Madrasas in Bangladesh

Category	Estimated Number
Alia madrasas	14,000 to 18,000
Quomi madrasas	4,000 to 60,000
Students attending madrasas	1.4 million to 4 million

Alia Madrasas

The Alia madrasa system comprises a hybrid curriculum and management system that was initiated by the British colonial government in the Indian subcontinent in the eighteenth century. Since Persian was the court language and Mughal rulers patronized Perso-Arabic education before the British takeover, the East India Company established the Calcutta Alia Madrasa in 1780 in order to create a pool of government employees who

were well versed in Islamic law and administrative practices as well as the English language.²⁰ The Alia Madrasa was thus intended not so much to inculcate religious lessons as to provide instruction in secular subjects.²¹ The curriculum of Calcutta Alia Madrasa was a revised version of Dars-i-Nizami—a

loosely defined curriculum and set of texts on Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy offered at a leading Arabic-medium madrasa in Lucknow. Calcutta Alia Madrasa, however, lost its importance when English became the official language of India in the 1830s. Early in the twentieth century, the British government introduced the “new scheme madrasas” to attract Muslim students in larger numbers. These madrasas offered a combination of religious and secular subjects that promised its graduates access to job markets in the changing sociopolitical context. They were government funded and centrally managed by a Madrasa Education Board. The new scheme madrasas became popular and increased significantly; there were more than a thousand new scheme madrasas with around 86,000 students in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) at the time of Partition.²² The Calcutta Alia Madrasa was moved to Dhaka after Partition, then to its present site in Bakshibazar in the old part of Dhaka in 1961. The new scheme madrasas were gradually transformed into Alia madrasas in the 1960s and came under the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board in 1978 after independence.

The Alia madrasa system of contemporary Bangladesh offers a 16-year-long education comprising five levels: Ebtedayee (primary), Dakhil (secondary), Alim (higher secondary), Fazil (bachelor), and Kamil (master). Table 5 shows government published education statistics for 2018. It is interesting to note that female students outnumbered their male counterparts at the Dakhil and Alim levels in terms of enrollment.

TABLE 05
Aliya Madrasa System Breakdown

Level of Alia Madrasa System	Estimated Number	Number of Institutions Receiving Enrollees (2018)	Percentage of Female Enrollment (2018)
Ebtedayee	3.4 million	4,312	Unknown
Dakhil		6,553	60
Alim		1,412	55
Fazil		1,085	Unknown
Kamil		244	Unknown

Source: BANBEIS, 2018²³

The Alia system has experienced more than 55% growth during the past few decades, with a five-fold increase in its student population.²⁴ Alia madrasas are largely located in non-urban areas (Table 6). Chittagong division (Bangladesh is divided into eight administrative divisions) has the largest share of madrasas, while Barisal has the lowest in terms of absolute numbers. A 40:60 blend of secular and religious education is offered at the first three levels.²⁵ The Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board (BMEB) under the MoE centrally manages the financial, curricular, assessment, and degree-offering responsibilities. Alia degrees are government recognized, and graduates can obtain general stream education at the higher education levels. As part of the public-private partnership, the government pays salaries for teachers and administrators of selected Alia madrasas. In 2018, 1,519 independent Ebtedayee and 7,600 post-primary Alia madrasas were benefitting from this subsidy program. Thanks to the

government's recognition, as well as subsidies and its pioneering method of unifying Islamic and secular education, Alia madrasas are seen globally as a unique model of Islamic education.

The Alia madrasa system faces challenges that include a severe shortage of qualified teachers, lack of education resources, and stigma towards Alia madrasa education.²⁷ Recent BANBEIS data shows that only 22.8% of all Alia madrasa teachers received teacher training.²⁸ There is only one teacher training institute (the Madrasa Teacher's Training Institute) for more than 150,000 Alia madrasa teachers in Bangladesh.²⁹ Rural madrasas usually lack resources and are understaffed. Since a large number of independent Ebtedayee madrasas do not receive any government money, the teachers are often not paid at all for years. Frequent protests, demonstrations, and hunger strikes organized by teachers' unions, such as the Bangladesh Independent Ebtedayee Madrasa Teachers' Association, demand nationalization of all the registered Ebtedayee madrasas under the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board. Bangladesh Jamiatul Mudarreseen, another large teachers' association for Alia madrasas, also negotiates with the government on Monthly Pay Order (the government cash subsidy program for teachers) issues.

TABLE 06

Location and Distribution of Alia Madrasas

Location and Distribution of Alia Madrasas	
Percentage of rural madrasas	86%
Percentage of urban madrasas	14%
Division with most madrasas	Chittagong (17.67%)
Division with least madrasas	Barisal (4.26%)

Quomi Madrasas

The Quomi system evolved as an anticolonial movement in British India in the nineteenth century. The British creation of the Alia madrasa system, which prioritized Persian over Arabic as the medium of instruction and curtailed the Dars-i-Nizami curriculum significantly, did not satisfy many Muslim scholars. At the same time, the anticolonial war of independence in 1857, where many Muslim scholars and activists participated against the British regime, brought them state animosity and new controls. Against this backdrop, ulamas, who took a puritanical approach to Quran- and hadith-based Islamic knowledge, felt the need for a separate community-based conservative education system for Muslim youth.³⁰ The first initiative to create such madrasas was undertaken by two veterans of the 1857 war, Muhammad Qasim Nanotavi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, who established a madrasa in Deoband in Uttar Pradesh, India, in 1866. Over the next 100 years, these “conservative, legalistic, literalist” madrasas expanded exponentially and became the most popular Islamic education institutions across the Indian subcontinent.³¹

In Bangladesh today, Quomi madrasas are governed by six major independent education boards, the Befaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh (BEFAQ) being the largest. Founded in 1978, BEFAQ claims to serve a much higher number of students than government statistics report, as seen in Table 7. It is difficult to validate any claims as to the number of Quomi madrasas or students due to their autonomous nature and lack of comprehensive data. However, an independent study estimated that in 2009, Quomi madrasas accounted for about 2% of primary and secondary school enrollment.³² A further point of interest is that many of these children are enrolled in Quomi and secular schools simultaneously.³³ The Quomi system also follows a loosely constructed Dars-i-Nizami curriculum. Several madrasas teach secular subjects such as Bangla and English language and literature, geography, history, and mathematics up to Grade 8.

However, how much academic attention is given to these subjects, along with questions and assessments around teacher quality, is uncertain.

TABLE 07

Quomi Madrasas in Numbers

Feature	BEFAQ Board Estimates	Government Estimates (covering all 6 boards)
Number of Quomi madrasas	15,000 (represented by BEFAQ)	13,902 (total)
Number of students served	1.85 million (by BEFAQ board)	1.3 million (total)

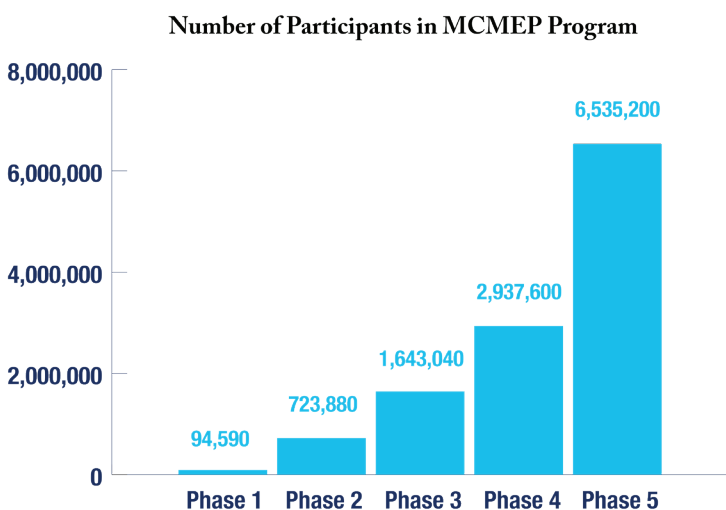
Source: BANBEIS, 2018³⁴

Dar-ul-Arqam Madrasas

In addition to the state-sponsored Alia madrasas and independent Quomi madrasas, a new stream of madrasas, Dar-ul-Arqam, was introduced in 2018 by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, an autonomous

FIGURE 02

MCMEP Growth in Participants



statutory organization that reports to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Islamic Foundation, founded in 1975, aims to spread Islamic values throughout the country, manage funding for mosques and Islamic organizations, train imams, and produce research and publications on Islamic topics. The foundation has run a Mosque-based Children and Mass Education Program (MCMEP) since 1993. Primarily catering to marginalized, poor, and hard-to-reach populations, this program includes pre-primary and adult Quranic education programs and has seen exponential growth over the years.

Based on the program's success and with strong support from the current

ruling party, the Awami League, the foundation has launched 1,010 new madrasas across the country. The Awami League's 2018 election manifesto promised to upgrade the madrasa curriculum and include vocational education in the regulated madrasa system. The foundation currently provides primary level education through this system from Grades 1 to 5, with a goal of eventually reaching the master's degree level. The foundation has already recruited 957 teachers from Alia and Quomi madrasa background for its Darul Arqam (Ebtedyee) standard madrasas. However, educational scholars in Bangladesh are wary of this initiative, suggesting that the third stream will create more issues in the country's already chaotic madrasa system.³⁵

Debates Around Madrasa Education

Madrasas offer real solutions to the dearth of education institutions and its various facilities. Including food and lodging make them an attractive option for parents, especially among the lower class.³⁶ However, madrasas occupy a vexed position within the national imagery. They see themselves as bearers of the Muslim identity and its constituting practices, which education is tasked with fostering. As a result, they seek a certain position of authority as flagbearers of Islamic education and its accompanying sensibilities. However, there is difficulty in arriving at a consensus as to what is being Islamic and the “right” kind of Islamic education. As a result, not only are there contestations between Islamic and other actors, but also between the different Islamic education providers. For example, Quomi madrasas perceive the abridged version of the Dars-i-Nizami curriculum offered at the Alia madrasas as watered down and superficial. The secular stream considers the Alia madrasas’ teaching of secular subjects to be of inferior quality, resulting in graduates with weaker language and numerical skills as compared to their secular school counterparts. For example, a newspaper report indicated that 76 Alia madrasas out of 119 in Dhaka district did not have any Alim-level (Grades 11 to 12) students in their science departments.³⁷

Nonetheless, Alia madrasas make significant contributions to increasing access to education and achieving gender parity. A notable example of Alia madrasas’ contributions is in the higher education sector, where 32% of all university teachers in the humanities and social sciences were reportedly Alia graduates.³⁸ The Quomi madrasas are looked upon as too conservative and closed off to a broader education that equips students to be productive and accommodative in the modern world. The Quomi madrasa bloc does not take these allegations lightly. While many have adopted the teaching of secular subjects such as Bengali, English, mathematics, and science, they insist on not caving in to “external” pressures to modify and modernize as a way of retaining the force of the “Islamic” in their education structure and delivery.

Amidst such contestations, the Bangladesh government in 2018 recognized the Dawra-i-Hadith/Takhmil degree of Quomi madrasas as equivalent to a secular master’s degrees after longstanding demands from Quomi activists. A separate board was formed, Al-Haiyatul Uliya Lil-Jamiatil Qawmia Bangladesh, with members from all six major existing Quomi boards. The chairman of Befaql Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh, Allama Shafi, who is also the chief of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh (a coalition of madrasa teachers and Islamic advocacy groups) and rector of Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Moinul Islam Hathazari madrasa, is to be the ex-officio chairman of the 17-member board. However, although negotiated previously, there will be no government representative on the board. Quomi madrasas’ resistance to any direct state regulation of their curriculum and pedagogy thus far fuels suspicion and creates divides. Hefazat threatened the government that there would be a civil war if any regulatory measure was introduced over the Quomi system. Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, another Islamic group in Bangladesh, criticized the decision to recognize Quomi degrees and urged the government to bring Quomi madrasas under direct government regulation. In recent years, various teachers and high administrative authorities of the Quomi madrasa bloc, representing the Hefazat, have brought various kinds of pressure, including to change the national secular curricula on alleged grounds that certain contents in the latter go against an Islamic ethos.³⁹ Some changes have been made along these lines, though the government has been silent as to whether their decisions to introduce changes result directly from Hefazat pressure.⁴⁰

Madrasas seek a certain position of authority as flagbearers of Islamic education and its accompanying sensibilities. However, there is difficulty in arriving at a consensus as to what is being Islamic and the “right” kind of Islamic education. As a result, not only are there contestations between Islamic and other actors, but also between the different Islamic education providers.

The official position of madrasa administrators on women is inclusive and productive. There are many co-educational Aliya and Quomi madrasas dedicated for women. Table 8 illustrates the number of female Aliya madrasas compared to the total number of Aliya madrasas.

TABLE 08

Number of Aliya Madrasas as of 2018

Grade Level	Total Number of Madrasas	Number of Female Madrasas
Dakhil	6,553	987
Alim	1,412	105
Fazil	1,085	28
Kamil	244	14
Total	9,294	1,134

Source: BANBEIS, 2018⁴¹

Female graduates from madrasas often go on to formal employment, although there is no data on numbers or career choices. The fact that most female graduates become teachers may reflect limited opportunities and conservative norms for women that cut across society, even beyond realms where madrasas operate. However, it is noteworthy that madrasas continue to send out public messages about boundaries regarding Muslim women’s work and their bodies that appear restrictive to women who do not subscribe to the madrasa ideology.⁴² No countering public narratives and images, by way of campaigns or media messaging, promote alternative possibilities for women. The real-life options for madrasa students and possibilities are possibly wedged somewhere between problematic public proclamations and possible counter messaging. Generating more systematic data would help clarify understandings of madrasas’ treatment of female students, teachers, their role in influencing change, the nature of that change, and how graduates fare in work and life.

Diverse Providers and Actors in Islamic Education

The following section briefly describes several actors and providers of Islamic education.

Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh and Associated Madrasas

The Ahle Hadith (AH) movement is a unique organization that came into being in the mid-nineteenth century in northern India. The movement’s main tenet is the belief that the Quran, Sunnah, and hadith are the sole sources of religious authority, so anything introduced to Islam after the earliest time should be disregarded.⁴³ Early reports show that there were more than 50 AH madrasas in the 1960s, mostly located in northern and western Bengal. The AH madrasas flourished in the 1980s with the Islamization of the state under the military regimes. A steady flow of funding from Saudi Arabia also contributed to their growth. There is no consistent data on the total number of AH madrasas in Bangladesh today, but estimates range from 200 to 2,000.⁴⁴ AH madrasas primarily follow the Dars-i-Nizami curriculum but also encourage their students to study secular subjects and participate in the Aliya madrasa system’s examinations. The official website states the main aims of AH education programs as: (a) to introduce a unique and full-fledged Islamic education system on the basis of Quran and Sunnah by combining

the prevailing dual system of religious and general educations; (b) to introduce an equitable and easily available education system for all citizens, repealing the prevailing governmental and non-governmental capitalistic system of education, such as: kindergarten, pre-cadet, o-level etc.; and (c) to ensure separate educational environments for boys and girls and to adopt measures for higher education and separate job opportunities for both. A new board for the AH madrasas called Darul Hadith Education Board was formed in 2017 in order to produce independent curriculum and syllabi, as well as to publish necessary books and education materials. A Wikileaks document⁴⁵ indicates that AH Quomi madrasas are more open to accepting government regulations than their Deobandi counterparts.

Madrasas under Anjuman-E Rahmania Ahmadia Sunnia Trust

Anjuman-E Rahmania Ahmadia Sunnia is a Chittagong-based non-political, religious, and philanthropic organization that continues the legacy of a Sufi Hanafi tradition established by Syed Ahmed Shah Sirikoti, chief *khatib* of a Bengali mosque in Burma (present-day Myanmar). He formed an organization called Anjuman-E-Shura-E-Rahmania in 1925 to unite the Sunni people of Burma. Along with his followers in Chittagong, he established the Jamia Ahmadia Sunnia Alia madrasa at Sholashohar in Chittagong in 1937. Following the model of the Pakistan-based Darul Uloom Islamia Madrasa of Haripur, Jamia Ahmadia Sunnia Alia madrasa became one of the most influential Alia madrasas in that region. The Anjuman-E Rahmania Ahmadia Sunnia Trust was formed in 1956 in order to establish more Islamic educational institutions elsewhere. Currently, the trust manages 64 Alia madrasas and 28 *khanka sharifs* (Sufi gathering and education centers), located mostly in the Chittagong region. In addition to the formal and religious education provided through the madrasas and *khankas*, the trust regularly arranges informal education sessions for new members, seminars, *waj mahfils* (overnight Islamic recitation and sermon ceremonies), and proselytizing activities through a committee of volunteers, the Gausia Committee Bangladesh. Every year, the trust holds a large procession in Chittagong, Jashne Julus, commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

In addition to the Aliya, Quomi, and mixed madrasas, faith/Islam-inspired transnational players are engaged in providing education, although all of it not intended as Islamic. Notable amongst these are the following:

Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) is the largest and most influential Sufi-inspired NGO in Bangladesh and runs Khanbahadur Ahsanullah Teacher's Training College and Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, two well-known organizations, as well as several education programs across the country through its development field offices. DAM's education programs include early childhood development, play-based learning programs, primary and secondary education quality improvement projects, a school feeding program, education for street children, urban learning centers, vocational skills training, and adult literacy and continuing education for illiterate and neo-literate factory workers.

Muslim Aid UK is a faith-inspired international development organization and operates a plethora of education programs in Bangladesh. In collaboration with the government's Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB), Muslim Aid runs technical and vocational education programs (TVET) through the Muslim Aid Institute of Technology (MAIT) in several major cities. Muslim Aid's school feeding program and schoolyard vegetable gardening programs contribute to fighting hunger and improving the nutritional status of children from impoverished areas. It also works with local partners to run a child sponsorship program for orphan children.

Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited (IBBL) is the largest and most profitable bank of Bangladesh, with more than 11.7 million depositors and \$9.3 billion in assets according to the BBC. Some 27% of Bangladeshi remittances flow to the country through IBBL. Based on the bank's internal Sadaqah

Tahbil (charity fund), the Islami Bank Foundation (IBF) was formed in 1991 as a social services wing. IBF has a strong presence in Bangladesh's general, medical, and technical education sectors. Islami Bank International School & College (IBISC) offers a blend of British and Islamic curriculum education to its 348 students. IBF also manages three Bengali-medium primary and secondary schools, as well as one male-only and two female-only madrasas in Cox's Bazar and Dhaka. In addition, there are six institutes of technology, a medical college, a nursing college, and an institute of health technology under the foundation. Due to Islami Bank's alleged association with the rightwing Islamic political party Jamat-i-Islami Bangladesh, the IBBL and its programs face antagonistic treatment from the current government, which has banned Jamat's politics in the country.

Other Islamic development organizations, including Muslim Hands Bangladesh and Al-Falah Bangladesh, are active in Bangladesh's education sector through philanthropic and social development programs.⁴⁶

Privately run Islamic higher education and research institutions include Bangladesh Islami University, Islamic University of Technology, and International Islamic University Chittagong. At the public Islamic University, Kushtia, both secular and religious subjects are taught. Several other public and private universities have higher education degree programs in Islamic studies. Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Muinul Islam or the Hathajari madrasa and Al-Jamiatul Arabiatul Islamiah, Ziri/Jamiah Islamiah Arabia are two influential Quomi higher education institutions. Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought (BIIT) and Islamic Research Center Bangladesh at Bashundhara are two apex Islamic think tanks.

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a private, not-for-profit, non-denominational, international development agency, started working in Bangladesh in 1980. This Shia Ismaili Muslim organization works on capacity building of civil society, early childhood development, economic development, and education more broadly. Under the early childhood development program, AKDN has partnered with the government, local civil society organizations, and BRAC University's Institute of Education and Development to produce and pilot pluralistic materials through children's storybooks. A series of 11 original Bangla language storybooks have pluralistic themes (along with English translations), titled Milemishe Thaki (Living in Harmony), for children ages 3 to 8 years old. The books were successfully piloted in selected government, NGO, and Aga Khan schools at different locations. AKDN has been engaged with Bangladesh's education sector for the last three decades through Aga Khan Education Services (AKES). AKES manages an English-medium school in Dhaka that follows the British Certification System. Compared to Pakistan's 161 and India's 27 schools, Bangladesh has only one such school. Financial surpluses are reinvested to fund the school, which is considered one of the leading educational institutions in Bangladesh with more than 1,200 students and 100 teachers.

Haqqani Mission Bangladesh (HAMIBA), a Sufi-based organization, conducts both formal and informal spiritual education programs for students regardless of religious and economic background. HAMIBA currently runs one school and one college (Grade 11 to 12). However, HAMIBA hopes to build 65,000 schools and 65 colleges around the country, contingent upon funding. The organization also aims to open a university of theology, which would be the first of its kind in Bangladesh.

Case Study: Tahfizel Qur'anil Fazil Kamil Madrasa

Given serious divisions about the ideal elements of Islamic education and its values, an assessment of how madrasas deal with questions around diversity would be helpful. In the absence of systematic data on the topic, the best sources of information are interviews and secondary opinions and the inferences drawn from them. Madrasa teachers interviewed for this review asserted forcefully that they believe in fostering

the health of communities where people of different religious and ethnic identities can thrive. The recent focus on religious extremism and violence has led many prominent madrasa representatives to refute allegations of harboring extremism. Significant numbers of madrasa teachers have responded eagerly to external initiatives to make official statements denouncing acts of terror in the name of Islam, and in doing so, they believe they are playing a role in fostering tolerance.⁴⁷ However, deeper probing is needed to assess the madrasa narrative concerning community and collectivity in order to understand what kind of tolerance and diversity madrasa students uphold.

Within the sphere of Islam-inspired education in Bangladesh, madrasas comprise the most extensive constellations of Islamic education-providers. Madrasas also bear the brunt of critiques levelled at Islam-inspired education in general, including those emphasizing such institutions' limited intellectual rigor and dubious positions and practices relating to diversity. However, there are outliers within the madrasa system that aim to explore in fresh ways the contours of Muslim identity and to shape the ideals of Islamic education in ways that are progressive but also in agreement with the unifying aim of madrasas, that is, to preserve and uphold traditional Islamic education as a distinct stream in Bangladesh. These madrasas claim to have more robust commitments to intellectual flourishing and diversity in theological endeavors than other institutions.

The Tahfizel Qu'ranil Fazil Kamil Madrasa is a little-known example of such a madrasa, embodying both traditionalist and creative elements in Islamic education. In terms of formal classification, Tahfizel is an Alia madrasa. However, Tahfizel is not cast in the Alia mold, either in terms of the administration of the institution or the content of the education it delivers. Located in Sreepur, Dhaka, it was founded in 1992 by Professor Syed Ali Ashraf, a Bangladeshi Islamic scholar. At present, Tahfizel offers education to male children from pre-primary to Grade 12 in a fully residential setting.

The intrinsic inclusive potential of such a philosophy makes the Tahfizel Madrasa an apt case study. Its underlying philosophy derives from the framework for religious education developed by Professor Ashraf that seeks to combine the values of all major religions to uphold both the unity and diversity of religions.⁴⁸ Professor Ashraf conceptualized education as a process for the balanced and holistic development of individual personality that would allow the individual's relationship with God and nature to flourish.⁴⁹

The case study is based primarily on interviews with alumni of the madrasa who have remained actively engaged in promoting its welfare. Championing Tahfizel's founding philosophy, they assert that the madrasa's individual-centric approach makes its faith-based education more diverse and inclusive in comparison to approaches taken by other madrasas that impose Islamic precepts without much scope for individual reflection. At Tahfizel, education is conceptualized as leading from the training of the spirit to spiritual growth. Here, the notions of spirit and spirituality derive not from a specific religious tradition but are based on the recognition that such training and growth is to be pursued by each individual through his/her own religious path. Based on this conceptualization, there are dual purposes of the education at Tahfizel: firstly, to develop individuals as vicegerents of Allah, and secondly, to achieve the balanced growth of personality. The latter includes growth in spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific, and linguistic terms and also the training of the spirit, intellect, rational self, feelings, and bodily senses. Interviewees argued that faith is understood as being in a state of constant flux, a mental state that transitions from doubt to reason and back to faith. Therefore, even those who have different perspectives on Islam (and are therefore condemned as non-Muslims by traditionalists) are accepted and included at Tahfizel.

This conceptual foundation incorporates both traditional understandings of the purpose of Islamic education and novel approaches to thinking about faith and spirituality. This creative amalgamation is reflected in the curriculum at Tahfizel, which draws its resources from diverse streams of education and includes components that are unique to its offering. Tahfizel uses a blend of government textbooks on

Bangla, English, and social science and some portions from Alia madrasa books. Some materials are drawn from English-medium curricula, such as English-language textbooks and classic works of English literature like *The Merchant of Venice*. The studies on philosophy and spirituality are guided by the works of Professor Ashraf, who had a Sufi background and was also well-versed in Western philosophy. Key thinkers referred to include Muhammad Iqbal and Jamal al-Afghani. Moreover, every student at Tahfizel becomes a hafiz (guardian) of the Quran who is able to recite the entire book from memory.

The madrasas' ambition to broaden the horizons of Islamic thinking takes concrete form in its curriculum which is designed to equip students to pursue any stream of higher studies of their choosing, be it the religious, social, or natural sciences. There is some indication of the impact of this diverse approach in the career paths of its graduates, compared to typical products of the Alia stream. Since most Alia graduates go on to pursue subjects like Arabic and Islamic studies, few can secure places in medical colleges and engineering institutes.⁵⁰ From pursuing doctorates in religious science, natural science, and social science, to legal advocacy, journalism, and teaching at mainstream universities, Tahfizel alumni are working at distinguished institutions both within Bangladesh and around the world.

Tahfizel madrasa's claims of promoting diversity are not without limitations. It educates Muslims only, and the approach has not been made accessible to females. Our informants suggested that Bangladesh has not yet come up with the ideal place and rights for minorities which would allow them to be taught adequately as non-Muslims in a madrasa. As to including female pupils, they reported that earlier plans never came to fruition. Further, the focus on spirituality as an expansive and capacious container for education is not fully reflected in their curricula or extracurricular grounding in diverse religious pathways leading to Islam. The spiritual and intellectual journey remains circumscribed by Islamic precepts. Interviewees also argued that Tahfizel's aspirations have been unable to undo breaks in spiritual connections that colonialism brought into Bengal. Tahfizel also faces administrative and operational difficulties, stemming from lack of effective leadership and the pitfalls of applying their "business model" in an educational institution. Tahfizel used to have a few sibling madrasas, but these perished with the passage of time, succumbing to similar operational difficulties. At present, even Tahfizel is struggling due to the lack of qualified personnel both on the board and in the faculty. Other existential threats to the madrasa emanate from the mainstream madrasas that may engulf it.

Looking to the future, interviewees argued that a great challenge with taking pluralistic Islam forward in Bangladesh is a low tolerance towards new ideas. Inclusive practices, such as having shared social celebrations, may be acceptable, but there is significant resistance towards engaging with theologically contested ideas across the same table. To address this challenge, they argue for books on modernist interpretations of Islam that can invigorate Islamic intellectual inquiry to be disseminated among madrasas. Some of the alumni have taken such initiatives in the past but met overwhelming opposition from traditionalists. While direct integration into the curriculum may not be a practicable first step, the process could be initiated by handpicking students from such madrasas who could informally organize book clubs, reading circles, and debates to gradually initiate this line of thinking.

While the Tahfizel madrasa stands at the peripheries of the madrasa system, it constitutes an important example of alternative approaches to Islamic education within the madrasa stream. Despite the various pressures and operational challenges it faces, Tahfizel presents a different way of thinking about Muslim education in Bangladesh that uses Islam's intellectual resources and maintains the core Islamic character of the madrasa to pave the way for new discourses in Islamic education.

Tahfizel was part of a larger social and intellectual movement known as the Islamization of Knowledge (IoK) initiative pioneered by Syed Ali Ashraf in the 1980s. The main premise of IoK initiative was to: "Islamize the acquired knowledge through developing Islamic concepts, re-structuring the curriculum, writing textbooks and building Islamic academics in various disciplines of knowledge."⁵¹ Bangladesh,

as one of the organizers of the Third World Conference on Muslim Education held in 1981, joined the movement through government sponsorship as well as private initiatives. Government initiatives included establishment of the Islamic Foundation in 1975, Islamic University in 1979, Institute of Islamic Education and Research in 1980, Islamic amendments to the national Constitution in the 1970s and 1980s, national committees on Islamic educational policies in 1987 and 1994, and more recently, the Islamic-Arabic University in 2013. Private efforts to Islamize knowledge include establishment of several Islamic private universities such as Darul Ihsan University in Dhaka in 1993, International Islamic University Chittagong in 1995, Asian University of Bangladesh in 1996, Manarat International University in 2001, and Bangladesh Islami University in 2005. Several think tanks and research organizations came into being in the last two decades. Islami Academy Bangladesh, Bangladesh Islamic Information Bureau, Islamic Economic Research Bureau, Islamic Education Society, Bangladesh Islamic Center, Islamic Law Research Council & Legal Aid Bangladesh, and BIIT are private organizations that conduct academic research and organize seminars, conferences, and trainings on different aspects of Islam in the country. Many of these organizations actively publish “high value Islamic academic research products” in the form of books and journals.⁵² Organizations like BIIT are involved in redesigning and developing curriculum, writing textbooks, creating an Islamic resource materials warehouse, teaching and training professional courses, and translating canonical books of major Islamic scholars around the world as part of the IoK agenda.

Syed Ali Ashraf remains an important source of intellectual inspiration for BIIT’s work, but the institute’s executive director, Dr. M. Adbdul Aziz, noted in an interview with CPJ staff that there is no formal working relationship between Tahfizel and BIIT at present. More information on how Tahfizel situates itself in the globally waning IoK initiative at the local level would offer depth to the history of IoK in Bangladesh. It would also be important to understand if Tahfizel is a consumer of the IoK materials produced by BIIT and whether the materials are culturally sensitive, sociopolitically cohesive, and pedagogically appropriate for the Tahfizel students.

CHRISTIANITY AND EDUCATION

Christian FIOs have had lasting effects on education across the Indian subcontinent. Baptist missionary movements in the nineteenth and twentieth century shaped the education landscape of Bengal in significant ways, establishing more than 100 elementary schools and Serampore College in undivided Bengal between 1816 and 1818.⁵³ These schools mostly connected the Sunday school curriculum with day schools associated with the missions; teachers who taught Sunday school generally taught at the day schools. In the modern era, Christian education has been highly influenced by ecumenical movements through the formation of regional and national conferences.⁵⁴ Apart from providing secular education as part of the larger national education systems, churches also focus on moral education and Christian character formation.

Christians in contemporary Bangladesh are a small minority (0.5% of the total population, or some 866,000 people). Christian communities nonetheless have significant social influence through various FIOs that work on social and economic development and in the public health and education fields. Their capacity and focal issues vary widely, ranging from microcredit to social philanthropy. Many Christian FIOs are well-funded and have strong international linkages. Christian organizations were leaders during the post-Liberation War humanitarian crisis, numerous cyclone disasters, and other relief efforts. Christian NGOs, such as Caritas (one of largest development organizations in Bangladesh), began to offer social development programs such as education, women’s empowerment, and income generation.

Today, they run a variety of education programs for disadvantaged populations with church-based schools providing services focused on marginalized populations. Catholic schools, in particular, are renowned for the quality of education they have long provided. A 2008 study found that students at Catholic schools had a 96% pass rate for the Secondary School Certificate exam, compared with the national average of 70%.⁵⁵ Statistics on Catholic education in Bangladesh are summarized in Table 9.

The following section highlights the main actors engaged in Christian education in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Catholic Education Board Trust (BCEBT)

Catholic schools are the second largest (after madrasas) providers of formal education managed by FIOs. Each of the country's eight dioceses has numerous episcopal commissions, such as commissions for catechetics and biblical apostolate, health care, and family life. Catholic schools are managed by the commission for education of the diocese where they are located. The education commissions of the eight dioceses together form the BCEBT. Education institutions coming under the board are shown below in Table 10.

TABLE 09
Christian Education in Numbers

Christianity and Education in Bangladesh	
Number of Christians	866,000 (0.5% of population)
Number of Catholic educational institutions	600
Number of students served	143,500
Religious composition of student body	10% Catholic, 90% non-Catholic

Source: "Faith and Development in Focus: Bangladesh"⁵⁶

TABLE 10
Bangladesh Catholic Education Board Trust at a Glance

Bangladesh Catholic Education Board Trust	
Number of Catholic dioceses	8
Number of universities under BCEBT	1
Number of colleges under BCEBT	12
Number of secondary and primary schools under BCEBT	579
Number of vocational training institutes	13

Source: BCEBT interview

Most Catholic schools in Bangladesh follow the national curriculum from the primary to secondary levels. Some schools use supplementary values education materials at the primary level, usually for Christian

children. Many churches organize Sunday schools for Christian children as well. A few urban Catholic schools have recently begun to provide English-medium education under the British curriculum. Urban Catholic secondary schools (Grades 6 to 10) have opted out of the Monthly Pay Order, but rural Catholic schools still receive government subsidies. The rationale behind declining government support for the urban schools is that the schools enjoy more autonomy without the government money, thus allowing them to set their standards for enrollment as well as fees. Apart from receiving government subsidies for rural schools, the BCEBT cooperates with the government in preparing the Christian religion and ethics textbook for the national curriculum in collaboration with other Christian denominations of the country. The Catholic community has a growing presence in tertiary education. The highly reputed Notre Dame College, founded in 1949, was formalized as a university in 2013 (it has strong partnerships with the University of Notre Dame in the United States). It offers coursework in English, economics, law, philosophy, and business administration.⁵⁷

Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha (BBCS)

BBCS is the oldest and largest Protestant denomination in Bangladesh. Some basic information on the structure and scale of its functioning is presented in Table 11.

TABLE 11
Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha at a Glance

Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha	
Number of regional sanghas	10
Number of churches	374
Number of baptized members	23,092

Source: BBCS website⁵⁸

(CCTB) prepares pastors, deacons, and lay leaders through theological education by extension (TTA) programs. CCTB was established in 1968 by representatives from 16 national churches and mission bodies, and it thus became the country's first interdenominational theological training institute. The academy offers a B.Th. and M.A. in Christian studies, following a curriculum that teaches Baptist doctrine, the life of Jesus Christ and his teaching, and pastors' character and calling. Currently, there are 300 students studying in the academy. In addition to the educational institutions, the sangha maintains two scholarship and student loan programs: Sangha Pastors and Students Fund (SPSF) and Sangha Education Loan Fund (SELF), for children from ultra-poor families.

The BBCS carries on the legacy of the early colonial Baptist mission education movement started in the region by William Carrey. Almost all the churches conduct Sunday schools for children that are managed by regional Sunday school committees. The BBCS manages several educational institutions as seen in Table 12.

Mission schools, popular shorthand for the BBCS schools, follow the national curriculum. The College of Christian Theology Bangladesh

TABLE 12
Educational Institutions Managed by BBCS

Type	Number
Primary school	1
Secondary school	4
Integrated school for blind	1
College of theology	1

Source: BBCS website⁵⁹

Church of Bangladesh (CoB)

CoB is an umbrella organization for the Anglican and English Presbyterian Churches in Bangladesh. CoB focuses on the poorest of the poor, and its stated objective is “to ensure a holistic and quality education for children to grow with joy and wisdom.” CoB has formed an education board under its social commitment program with the following institutions.

The primary schools, junior secondary schools (Grades 6 to 8), and secondary schools are in six deaneries and one city pastorate. Like other church schools, these schools follow the national curriculum. CoB also runs Sunday schools and boys' and girls' brigade programs where children learn about Jesus and Protestantism through several interactive learning activities such as Bible quizzes, sports, cultural programs, drawings, physical exercise, and drama. Four trade schools and craft centers located in four

different regions of Bangladesh provide hands on training to poor and underprivileged young people.

TABLE 13

Educational Institutions and Scope of CoB

Feature	Number
Primary school	45
Junior secondary school	2
Secondary school	4
Total number of students	9,864
Total number of staff	341

Source: "Education Board," Church of Bangladesh, <https://churchofbangladesh.org/ministry/social-commitment-2/education/>

humanitarian organization, provides early childhood development programs and literacy support to children from the most vulnerable communities. Heed Bangladesh, funded mostly through Tearfund, an international Christian charity, has a considerable education footprint. Heed International School offers British curriculum education through two campuses in Mirpur and Sadarghat, Dhaka. It manages one primary school, a foreign language center, and a technical training center. The World Mission Prayer League (WMPL), a pan-Lutheran fellowship, runs a British curriculum school called LAMB English Medium School for both Santal (an ethnic group native to India and Bangladesh) and non-Santal children in Dinajpur. The National Christian Fellowship of Bangladesh (NCFB), an evangelical alliance of around 6,000 churches in Bangladesh, maintains Sunday schools, pastor training programs, and youth engagement programs through the Board of Education and Literature.⁶⁰

Challenges in Christian Education

Catholic schools have a reputation as some of the best schools in Bangladesh. They are, however, concerned that recent education reforms in the Bangladeshi national curriculum could have a negative impact. The secretary of the BCEBT, Mr. Jyoti Gomes, observed during an interview with WFDD staff that the government will apply stricter regulations to student admission, teacher recruitment, and overall management of the schools under the 2010 national education policy. An example is proposed structural changes in the organization of the grade levels for the primary and secondary levels. In the

Other Organizations

Several large Christian development organizations actively participate in education programs in Bangladesh. Caritas is working to promote education rights and inclusive quality education for marginalized populations (see case study below). Some key achievements for the year 2017–2018 include providing access to primary education for 47,866 children through 1,139 education centers and conducting training programs for 147 teachers and 1,236 youths on morality and values. World Vision Bangladesh, a leading Christian

new system (not yet implemented), children's primary education will be extended from Grade 5 to 8, and secondary education from Grades 9 to 12. BCEBT fears that this policy will require a significant increase in classrooms as well as teachers in order to accommodate new classes in the existing buildings, creating serious financial and infrastructural challenges, as most existing schools are in marginalized areas with limited resources. Another fear is that space for entertaining a Christian identity in Bangladesh will shrink, as schools lose their Christian character when they cannot outwardly express their Christian identities given significant hostility and violence against Christian organizations (and other minority groups' organizations).⁶¹ Christians, it is argued, face pervasive discrimination and prejudice in society and can fall victim to various forms of oppression such as land-grabbing by use of violence and intimidation.⁶²

Diversity and Inclusion in Education by Christian FIOs

Education was an important area through which colonialism grew roots, with significant imperial cultural imports across South Asia. An evangelical moralizing mission was central to education reform.⁶³ The colonial education reform project established a foundation for English-language education, as it became increasingly important for career opportunities under the colonial administration. Active debates between colonial administrators and evangelicals on Christianity as a civilizing mission to the colonies found some resolution in diverse approaches to the cultural changes that were sought and accomplished through education. Christian mission education thus carried the contradictory placard of colonial domination on the one hand and more modernizing approaches on the other.

Education was an important area through which colonialism grew roots, with significant imperial cultural imports across South Asia.

In Bangladesh today, Christian organizations, as representatives of a minority faith tradition, seek to impart quality education and do so in an inclusive manner.

Interviews highlighted that Catholic organizations uphold their identity as Bangladeshi education providers as they offer the national curriculum. All Christian denominations share the goal of preserving and promoting Christian teachings among those of Christian faith, and hence, the flourishing of Bangladesh's Christian population. Interviews highlighted a common goal of advancing interfaith dialogue and a pluralistic ethos. A Catholic leader indicated that Vatican directives specifically support celebrating pluralism in different spheres of social life, including education. Bishops deliver messages during every major religious celebration that encourage interfaith dialogue. Christian schools serve children from all backgrounds. While it is not a formal component of the curriculum, teachers address issues of religious diversity and pluralism in the course of their teaching.⁶⁴

Catholic nuns have played important roles in promoting education for girls. There are some 20 to 25 congregations of Catholic nuns, and education is the main principle of 10 such congregations. Before the Liberation War, there were separate school buildings for boys and girls, but all schools are now co-educational. There is now greater gender diversity in the schools run by Christian FIOs than was previously the case, although male students still outnumber female students by a wide margin. Gender diversity is also reflected in the administration and faculty. Catholic sisters play important roles in the education provided by Christian FIOs. The Sisters of the Holy Cross, who, in 1951, founded the establishment that would go on to become the highly renowned Holy Cross Girls' High School and College, provide an apt example. SFX Greenherald International School is another example of a Christian education provider with nuns on their faculty. Many sisters pursue qualifications such as bachelor's and master's degrees in education and other qualifications in the specific subjects they will teach. Over the last 30 years, the Bangladesh Catholic Education Board has taken initiatives to send sisters on annual trainings to countries like the Philippines, France, and the United Kingdom for various subjects.

Case Study: Caritas Bangladesh

Christian FIOs, including Caritas, share the goal of promoting inclusivity, notably in their openness to serving students of all religious backgrounds without discrimination and in a broad commitment to plural societies. However, the institutions today enjoy less operational autonomy than in the past and are increasingly subject to standardized regulations that are seen to limit their scope for innovation. Interfaith work that many pursue through different platforms is rarely reflected in the administration or content of the education they deliver.

Against this somewhat uninspiring backdrop, Caritas Bangladesh (CB) presents a promising illustration of the pursuit of innovation even within an unfavorable environment. CB was established in the aftermath of the Liberation War in 1971, and its work is undergirded by both the teachings of the Christian Gospel and the fundamental principles of Bangladesh's constitution, such as democracy, socialism, secularism, and nationalism. CB describes itself as the "social arm" of the Catholic Church in Bangladesh,⁶⁵ and as such, education is integral to its work. Its first foothold in Bangladesh's education sector was in 1983 when it began offering pre-primary education in remote areas. Multigrade education centers were established in these regions to offer non-formal education, with the ultimate aim of assisting the students in transitioning into nearby mainstream government schools. This program has expanded considerably over the years, with 700 such centers introduced by 1997. At present, there are about 300 such centers in remote parts of Bangladesh. The program is a core component of CB's work in the education sector.

Indigenous peoples are an important focus of CB's education work, as these populations tend to be concentrated in remote areas and generally have very poor access to education. CB has offered multilingual education for Adibashis (indigenous people) for over a decade. Since 2013, these programs have expanded to serve eight minority populations with education in nine languages. Inclusiveness is core to CB educational programs, and its work crosses many social divides. Shishir Rozario, CB's manager of education, reports that the organization ensures that wherever their programs are in operation, education is delivered to female children, children with special needs, Adibashis, and other generally excluded groups, with no distinction of caste, religion, or other markers of social difference.

What is unique among CB's efforts to foster social cohesion is a distinct training component. Since 1992, Caritas has delivered teachers' training with a special emphasis on moral and ethical values. This values training is offered to teachers drawn from diverse educational institutions, including madrasas, and is aimed primarily at those teaching at the secondary level. The programs are titled "Education to Reality" and "Values Education." Their core content comprises instruction on how moral and ethical values can be imparted through the frameworks of existing curricula, whether the government or madrasa variant, without using any additional teaching material or other resources. This training is not offered currently on a very large scale: About eight or nine trainings are conducted annually, with approximately 25 to 30 participants per training program. Similar training programs for youth focus on instilling moral and ethical values and aim to develop leadership and life skills and enhance employability. They also cover issues of gender equality, health, and hygiene.

The programs on values education derive their normative content from Catholic social teaching. These teachings enshrine universal values, such as the primacy of the human person, social justice, empowerment for the powerless, respect for the earth, and holistic development along every dimension, including intellectual, cultural, and social. The essential idea is that such learning should not be text-based but rather, should directly engage participants and be interactive. In addition to promoting universal values, there is a more direct interfaith element to these programs as they incorporate discussions on each religion, with a focus on how common lessons can be drawn from diverse faith traditions. Here, the trainers at CB also emphasize the importance of irreligious dialogue and non-communalism.

CB has faced some difficulties in seeking to promote social cohesion through this novel approach. Drawing madrasa teachers to training programs is still a challenge, although it has eased considerably. The problem hints at a more fundamental rift that CB has not yet confronted—the lack of genuine acknowledgement that its values education approach has potential universality. For this reason, in seeking participants from different religious backgrounds, the Catholic origins of the teachings around which the programs are organized are not emphasized. The training programs also do not place trainees of different faiths in direct conversation with one another or attempt to address deeper cleavages that divide Bangladeshi society into faith-bound communities. Mr. Rozario identified challenges that all Christian FIOs currently face. First and foremost is a lack of adequate funding and support. This affects all of CB's educational work and is the main impediment to the expansion of the values training programs. CB relies on its traditional donors, as no institutional donors are currently willing to finance its education work. The level of government support for NGOs working in the education sector is perceived to be dwindling, conveying the impression that the government does not wish such organizations to continue any supplemental role in education.

Looking to the future, CB intends to maintain its priorities vis-à-vis education. Moral and ethical values training is an important priority, along with multilingual education. Child protection is a new priority, to be pursued both within educational institutions and families. CB intends to rely on its own programs and on policy advocacy to influence the government for more far-reaching changes.

CB offers an impressive case of innovation for socially cohesive education. Operating within tightening boundaries of regulations, it tries to uphold its commitment to universal ideals and achieves significant success. Restricting its work on values education to select groups rather than seeking broad-based curricular reform may be a distinct strength of the CB approach, offering a sustainable avenue for impactful interfaith work that can be transmitted further by educators and youth leaders whose influence in society may well survive in times of political upheaval.

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HINDUISM AND EDUCATION

The term Hinduism refers to an amalgamation of highly diverse Indic religious traditions that have been practiced for millennia across the Indian subcontinent. Despite large-scale conversion to Islam in Eastern Bengal under Mughal rule and mass departures during the 1947 Partition, Hindus are the largest religious minority in Bangladesh. In the colonial period, Hindus were the primary land-owning class in the feudal zamindar system, which the British patronized; Hindus owned some 85% of buildings and property in and around urban centers.

At least two types of indigenous vernacular education during the precolonial and early colonial periods were supported by the Hindu elite class and the common people. The zamindars patronized classical Sanskrit learning through land endowments in Bengal. These learning centers, known as *tol*, provided free education to students from upper classes such as Brahmins and Khatriayas. The curriculum of the *tol*s usually involved 12 years of studying Vedic law, logic, literature, and grammar. The second stream of common schools in Bengal were *pathsala*. These one-teacher small schools were informally held outside

of the teacher's/guru's house, at local communal temples, and/or under a large tree where the teacher trained his disciples on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Records from the British colonial era describe these schools as "democratic and secular," welcoming teaching and learning by Muslims as well as other Hindu caste teachers and students.⁶⁶ Both *tols* and *pathsalas* were highly decentralized in the absence of a comprehensive scheme or central authority.

The nineteenth-century reformation movements of Hinduism in Bengal had a significant impact on the region's education sector. The non-sectarian monotheistic Brahma Samaj (Society of Brahma) movement, led by the likes of social reformers Raja Rammohun Roy, Devendranath Thakur, Keshubchandra Sen, and Rabindranath Thakur, created several schools for both male and female students combining Vedantic and western education subjects. The Brahma Samaj also established schools for disabled children and a night school for working children in Kolkata. Later, neo-Hindu movements in Bengal eventually eclipsed the Brahmos and other Hindu reformers in size and influence; these interpretations are most influential in the region today.⁶⁷ Notable leaders of the neo-Hindu movement included Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. With the founding of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, the neo-Hindu movement began to focus more on social service than social reform. Focusing primarily on health and education, these social service organizations prioritized character-building and the inner spiritual development of students. Education was similarly the focus of another leading neo-Hindu figure, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who opened schools across Bengal, with many directed at increasing educational opportunities for women (nearly 200 schools for women across rural Bengal).

Today, most Hindu children in Bangladesh are educated in the national curriculum system. However, some programs offer primarily Hindu religious education through temples.

Hindu Religious Welfare Trust (HRWT)

HRWT, a government organization under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, generates funding to maintain Hindu temples, provides training to the Hindu clergy, and manages a temple-based child and mass literacy program. Currently in its fifth phase, the program aims to utilize temple premises to provide early childhood/pre-primary and mass education for Hindu children and adults, increase primary education enrollment, reduce dropouts, and ensure a fun and interactive learning environment. The program has seen significant growth since its inception in 2003. In 2018, 191,250 students participated at 6,450 existing temples around Bangladesh, compared to 11,970 students and 630 temples in 2003. The new phase has introduced 200 Holy Geeta Learning Centers with the goal of reaching 15,000 students by the end of 2021. The pre-primary curriculum is comprised of eight subjects: 1) national anthem; 2) pre-reading and writing; 3) rhymes, songs, and stories; 4) pre-mathematics; 5) arts and crafts; 6) physical exercise/yoga; 7) ethics and religious education; and 8) social environment and health. Women represent more than 80% of the program's teaching force. Notwithstanding significant growth in recent years, some challenges remain. Teachers are recruited on a part-time basis and are paid 2,300 taka (\$27) a month. Temples located in impoverished areas lack resources that promote a favorable environment for learning, such as lighting and fans. More important, there is no sound assessment system in place to monitor students' learning.

Ramakrishna Mission Bangladesh

Ramakrishna Mission Bangladesh was established in Dhaka in 1899 to propagate the teachings of leading neo-Hindu reformist Shri Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna popularized a pluralistic approach to divinity, saying that "*Jata mat, tata path*" (All paths lead to God). Following this motto, the mission is open to people of all faiths. It observes Hindu religious festivals as well as important Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian festivals. The Dhaka mission organizes interfaith dialogues at its premises. Ramakrishna Mission provides various social development programs, including education through nine missions all

over the country. It manages two secondary schools (one in Dhaka and another in Dinajpur, one of the northernmost cities) that are for boys only and follow the national curriculum exclusively. Most students are from Muslim households. A rural education program runs more than 250 tutoring centers for children from low-income families across Bangladesh and two orphanages for poor male children in Comilla and Chittagong. Nine other mission centers offer student housing, computer training, and stipend programs. Most missions hold weekly religious text reading and interpreting programs.

International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)

ISKCON, otherwise known as the Hare Krishna movement, is a highly organized and hierarchical Hindu religious organization. ISKCON's Bangladesh chapter has various formal and informal education programs among Hindu communities. There are residential education programs for ages 5 to 15 called "Gurukul Education" and temple-based education programs in its 75 countrywide temples. The ISKCON Youth Forum attracts mostly college and university students who participate in informal study circles.

Other Hindu Actors

Hindu philanthropy is usually local and family-managed in Bangladesh. Many Hindu landowners donated land and property for educational institutions. Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal, a family-run humanitarian organization, manages several educational institutions such as Bharateswari Homes, Devendra College, Kumudini Women's Degree College, Kumudini Women's Medical College, Kumudini Nursing School and Midwifery, and Trade Training School. Bharateswari Homes is a leading residential female school in the country that is open to girls regardless of religion, caste, or social status.⁶⁸

Challenges in Hindu Education

The contemporary landscape of Hindu education in Bangladesh bears the marks of Hinduism's history in Bengal and the wider region. Mass departures to India in 1947 and the social reformist movements and service-centric philosophy that emerged in the nineteenth century have shaped contemporary organizations that deliver Hinduism-inspired education in Bangladesh. They share philosophies and strong operational networks with their India-based parent organizations; service for humanity is a common thread across their multisectoral work, including education. However, such inspiration is muddled by age-old challenges that still beleaguer Hindus.

The cultural link with India brands Bangladeshi Hindus as a threat to Bangladesh's interests.⁶⁹ This impedes the work of Hindu FIOs that are widely perceived to owe allegiance to India. Moreover, according to the Hindu Mohajote, an alliance of 24 Bangladeshi Hindu organizations, underrepresentation of Hindu leaders in the Parliament politically marginalizes Hindus and jeopardizes the community's continued survival.⁷⁰ These factors together create a politically charged environment for Hindu FIOs, and many appear resigned to maintaining political neutrality.⁷¹ The threat to Hindu FIOs is not merely theoretical and includes incidents of religiously motivated violence, such as attacks on organizations like ISKCON⁷² and Ramakrishna Mission.⁷³ Political opposition melds with religious opposition when the services offered are equated with attempts to proselytize.⁷⁴ This is especially the case for educational programs which have faced high resistance when they try to open access to their education to children of diverse faiths; thus their conception of inclusivity is blocked.⁷⁵ Despite a shared view that education is a means to foster spiritual growth in all human beings irrespective of individuals' religious identity, FIO educational offerings directed to this end tend to be limited to persons of Hindu faith.⁷⁶

The FIOs involved address these common challenges in different ways. For instance, the Ramakrishna Mission is an established actor in philanthropic work, offering education, medical care, library services, and humanitarian aid. In a sense, its humanitarian character is more pronounced than its Hindu identity. On the other hand, ISKCON's Bangladesh chapter addresses the challenges by scaling back the

educational programs offered in Bangladesh in contrast to larger scale ISKCON operations elsewhere in the world.⁷⁷

The politicization of Hindu FIOs also limits the scope of their work and constrains their choices in the sphere of education. The Ramakrishna Mission Dhaka (RMD) combines the standardized government board education with education on “human values” drawn from the teachings of Sanatana Dharma. Its perspective on religious diversity accepts truth in all religions and understands education as offering the path to human development. The education offered by RMD thus aims to develop students’ moral character and instill the spirit of service to humanity, consonant with RMD’s overall mission as a humanitarian actor in Bangladesh. In contrast to RMD’s conception of education as a unifying force in a diverse society, ISKCON addresses the diversity question quite differently. While moral education is a component of their educational vision, the core purpose as an education provider is to enhance human consciousness based on Vedic teachings. Its existentialist approach purports to take each individual on a spiritual and intellectual journey to self-discovery and transformation, offering multifaith routes to reach enlightened conceptions of self and society.

The organizations also take different positions on gender inclusivity. RMD operates two educational institutions—a pre-primary school and a secondary school that extends up to Grade 10. While the former is co-educational, the secondary school accepts only male students, though some female teachers are recruited. In contrast, among the range of educational programs offered at ISKCON, most are intended for both male and female students. However, there is segregation at the higher levels with female teachers assigned for female students. Hence, both prominent actors in Hindu education take somewhat restrictive views on gender inclusivity, despite their purportedly progressive approaches to education.

These different approaches to diversity highlight ideological tensions and operational friction among Hindu FIOs. While there is a reluctance to comment on each other’s work, informants at RMD did express a critical view of what they perceive as ISKCON’s excessive conservatism. They distinguished themselves from ISKCON based on the contrasting understandings of religious morality. ISKCON, they suggested, regards morality as a rule-based system placing arbitrary constraints on choice (such as dietary strictures). RMD approaches morality as a means to achieving the end of universal human good, thus placing less emphasis on the specifics of conduct and more on the impact of one’s behavior on the lives of others. ISKCON, on the other hand, prides itself on its achievements in terms of inclusivity. Interviews there suggested that ISKCON’s progressive work is appreciated by the government, leading to more relaxed regulations than before, and has led development actors like Caritas to invite ISKCON representatives to share their insights on inclusive education. Internal divisions between Hindu providers in Bangladesh’s education system illustrate the complexity and variety of approaches to diversity taken by faith actors of the same tradition and underscores the importance of systematic study of the topic.

Case Study: ISKCON – Bangladesh

ISKCON established its Bangladesh chapter in 1972 and aims to promote the well-being of human society by revitalizing spirituality and strengthening individuals’ bonds with God.⁷⁸ Education is core to ISKCON’s work, and in Bangladesh, its operations have expanded and diversified greatly since its founding. From a sole *gurukul* (residential school where pupils live near a guru) in 1972, which offered only non-residential education, today ISKCON has three fully residential *gurukuls*, located in Chattogram, Thakurgaon, and Roopganj. ISKCON’s educational work has several other components. Jagrata Chatra Samaj aims to train students in the active preaching of Krishna consciousness, with 75 temples across Dhaka where temple schooling is offered as an option on Fridays. Perhaps the most distinctive part of ISKCON’s educational work is its youth forums, where systematic courses are offered for persons between the ages of 16 and 30. So far, 75 such youth forums have been held in Bangladesh.

The systematic courses offered by ISKCON take an innovative approach to faith-inspired education. It begins from a fundamental existentialist inquiry into the self that is designed to initiate a process of experiential learning that develops the individual's consciousness and stimulates transformation. This has an intrinsic inclusive potential that makes it an apt case study. ISKCON's philosophy of education is attributed to its founder, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Srila Prabhupada), who deemed the Western education system to be incomplete as it fails to explore and develop spirituality. Thus, ISKCON's philosophy is that education should enhance human consciousness. In addition to providing moral teachings, ISKCON believes that education should include instruction on the means of achieving fulfillment and transformation in human life. This understanding of education is reflected in the core issues explored in courses, such as "the discovery of the self," "real identity," "the meaning of substance" and explorations of the diversity of religions in the world, spiritual science, the benefits of faith and doubt, positive thinking, self-management, personality development, etc. Courses include many components for experiential learning, including camps like Spoorti camp and Neestha camp, study sessions, and mantra meditation circles. Course resources and training manuals are based on the Vedas. ISKCON staff emphasized that the Vedas are believed to be a comprehensive guide to fulfillment and transformation. Through the use of Vedic teachings in its courses, ISKCON seeks to revive the intellectual tradition of the Vedas in the subcontinent and lay the foundations for modern Vedic education there. Hence, while ISKCON promotes the belief that all religions are related and an individual of any faith can benefit from its education, the courses are grounded exclusively in Hindu philosophical thought.

ISKCON chapters elsewhere offer these systematic courses to individuals of all castes and religions, but in Bangladesh, ISKCON limits this offering to persons of Hindu faith. Our informants feel this is necessary due to the high level of intolerance and resistance ISKCON has to contend with in Bangladesh. In the past, even the government was quite restrictive and its relationship with ISKCON was strained, over time the relationship has eased somewhat. Although education at ISKCON intends to bridge across differences between individuals, the organization maintains rather strict views on gender. Hence, while *gurukul* education is offered to both male and female students, classes are segregated from age 12 onwards, and there are dedicated female teachers for the female students. This illustrates practical limits to ISKCON's claims to inclusivity and diversity in education.

ISKCON is acclaimed for its distinctive approach to education, and their teachers and trainers are highly sought-after by other progressive actors in the education sphere who seek innovative approaches to promoting spiritual wellbeing and social cohesion.⁷⁹ Looking to the future, ISKCON hopes to overcome social barriers and fortify its efforts towards inclusive education. It has, however, experienced several roadblocks. Negative press in 2019 shone light on the organization's intimate connection to neighboring India and its ruling party Bharatiya Janata Party in terms of funding and leadership networks. In July 2019, ISKCON faced a charge of Hinduization in Bangladesh during a school feeding program in Chittagong where they were allegedly forcing children to recite a Hindu chant in exchange for food. In October 2019, an ISKCON follower was accused of blasphemy in the Bhola district, which led to violent clashes between police and local protestors that resulted in four deaths and hundreds of injuries. Rising religious nationalism under the purview of Hindutva (extremist Hinduism) in the political life of India, the Kashmir crisis, and several anti-Islam laws at the state level have soured public opinion of India in Bangladesh. ISKCON's direct communication with India, relationships with the current ruling party, and recent incidents in Bangladesh have brought its work under close scrutiny.

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BUDDHISM AND EDUCATION

Ancient Bengal was a major center of Buddhist teaching and learning. During the reign of the great Buddhist kings Ashoka and Kanishka and later, during the Pala dynasty, Buddhism entered its golden age in Bengal. The Pala Empire became one of the most important centers of Buddhist learning globally. Widely traveled Bengali Buddhist teachers such as Atisha Dipankara contributed to the revival and spread of Buddhism in Tibet and Southeast Asia. Bengal is said to be the birthplace of Tantric (Vajrayana) Buddhism, which emphasizes mystical and esoteric practices and privileges the guru-disciple relationship as a means of sacred knowledge transmission.

Today, the Buddhist population, around 0.5% of Bangladesh's total population or roughly 750,000 individuals, is concentrated in the Chittagong region. Buddhist temples, with an estimated 1,290 in Bangladesh, are focal points of the Buddhist community, hosting not only religious practices but also a range of social and community services. Key actors and their activities regarding Buddhist education are described below.

Bangladesh Buddhist Association (BBA)

BBA, a national organization for Buddhist welfare and social activities, was established in Chittagong in 1887. BBA participates actively in spreading Theravada Buddhism through humanitarian work, education, and cultural programs. BBA runs the Chittagong Buddhist Monastery that carries the ancient Buddhist legacy of *Bihara*/monastery-based education programs. It also manages one kindergarten school, Dharma Bangsha Institute, a Pali college, and a library. Named after Chittagong Buddhist Monastery's late abbot Pundit Dharma Bangsha Mahathero, the Dharma Bangsha Institute provides secular education. Dipankar Pali College offers courses in Pali language and literature and is controlled by the Bangladesh Sanskrit & Pali Education Board.⁸⁰ There were at one point 110 Sanskrit and 88 Pali institutions under the auspices of the board, but numbers have significantly shrunk.⁸¹

Moanoghar

Moanoghar, a socioeducational and development organization, is located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Established in 1974 by Venerable Jnanashree Mahathera, Bimal Bhikkhu, and Venerable Prajnanandha Mahathera, Moanoghar served as a critically important resource for indigenous youth throughout the insurgency period (1977–1997) and today provides quality education in academic and technical subjects to disadvantaged youth from across the region. More than 1,400 students are currently enrolled in Moanoghar primary, secondary, and technical vocational schools. About 620 children come from remote villages and receive housing in the school's hostels, with the rest coming from neighboring villages. All students receive free or highly subsidized education. Another noteworthy socially engaged Buddhist endeavor, Parbatya Bouddha Mission in Khagrachari, operates an orphanage, health center, school, and vocational training center. Venerable Prajnanandha Mahathera established Banophool Adivasi Green Heart College in Mirpur, Dhaka, in 2008, which now has almost 2,000 students ranging from the equivalent of kindergarten to Grade 12. About 120 of the students are from indigenous communities in the CHT and board at the school. The 110 teachers teach in both English and Bengali. All teachers have post-graduate degrees, and the school has a reputation for high academic standards.

Other Buddhist Education Actors

Bangladesh Boudha Kristi Prachar Sangha (BBKPS), a regional center of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, currently manages four secondary schools and three higher secondary colleges in Dhaka and Chittagong. They all follow the national curriculum. Mahamandal Welfare Organization (MWO) Bangladesh was founded by Most Venerable Professor Prajna Bangsha Mahathera and manages a

monastery-based morning school, a bhikku training center, several meditation centers, and a secondary school. MWO provides financial support to underprivileged children. Bonoful Adivasi Green Heart College was established by Venerable Prajnananda Mahathera from the Chakma community in Dhaka in 2004. Following the national curriculum, it serves students from indigenous as well as mainstream societies. Similar to the Islamic Foundation and Hindu Religious Welfare Trust, Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust (BRWT)⁸² runs pagoda-based pre-primary education programs with 2,000 students participating in the program at 100 pagodas in 2016.

Challenges Facing Buddhist Education

Challenges faced by Buddhist FIOs should be understood in the context of Bangladesh's present political climate. While Buddhists constitute a small fraction of Bangladesh's total population, Buddhist organizations are important actors in the country's social, educational, and development sectors as their positive contributions bridge religious divides and build on traditions of harmony among Buddhists and Muslims. An example is distribution of iftar to fasting Muslims by Buddhist monks at the Dharmarajika Buddhist Monastery.⁸³ A Bangladesh Buddhist Federation representative recently argued that Buddhists in Bangladesh do not feel threatened or otherwise undermined.⁸⁴ However, there are reports of increased discrimination against Buddhists, culminating in the 2012 Ramu attack, which destroyed numerous Buddhist monasteries and households.⁸⁵ More recently, there have been isolated killings of Buddhist monks and other individuals of minority groups.⁸⁶ Bangladesh is currently mired in the Rohingya crisis (most Rohingyas have fled violence and persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar and taken refuge in Bangladesh). As most Rohingyas are Muslims, this has stoked hostility towards Buddhist Bangladeshis in this Muslim-majority country.⁸⁷ In addition to reports of outright killings, discrimination and harassment have been exacerbated, taking serious forms, including Buddhists being subjected to land-grabbing, public humiliation, and the bullying of children in schools.⁸⁸

The present political environment is unfavorable to the work of Buddhist FIOs, several of which aim to propagate the teachings of Theravada Buddhism through their work. Given that this is the form of Buddhism that is dominant in Myanmar, and extremist strands of this faith are understood to fuel the violence against Rohingyas,⁸⁹ it follows that groups that preach Theravada Buddhism in Bangladesh face dangers. Social work, the other integral component of their roles, has become all the more important in securing their identities and the faith traditions they represent as forces for social cohesion. However, as the secretary general of the Bangladesh Bouddha, Kristi Prachar Sangha, observed, their reliance on donations limits the social welfare and developmental work they can do. Financial constraints thus pose a major challenge for Buddhist FIOs in Bangladesh.

Buddhism and Diversity

Buddhist FIOs proclaim commitments to diversity, harmony, and peaceful coexistence.⁹⁰ However, interfaith work seems relatively peripheral to their educational programs and tends to take the form of ad hoc initiatives rather than systematic engagement. Dharmarajika Buddhist Monastery is justly commended for its multilevel interfaith efforts such as the various seminars, symposiums, and workshops it offers to persons of all religions and its arrangement of iftar meals for fasting Muslims during Ramadan.⁹¹ However, the schools at Dharmarajika do not address religious diversity beyond what is strictly provided in the national curriculum.

In terms of inclusivity, organizations like Dharmarajika and Moanoghar accept students from diverse religious backgrounds. Moreover, one of Moanoghar's principal aims is the betterment of poor and indigenous children, and this is pursued through the educational curriculum at its residential school, which presently houses about 650 students who are from 12 different ethnic groups. Thus, great emphasis is placed on ethnic inclusivity. Five indigenous languages are taught as part of the curriculum, and there

are also several “cultural troupes” for the students, in addition to the school’s regular publications.⁹² Approaches to gender diversity do not seem particularly progressive. While the school at Dharmarajika is co-educational, separate sections are maintained for male and female students. Male students at Moanoghar greatly outnumber their female counterparts (425 versus 225).⁹³ While Buddhist FIOs undertake considerable social welfare and developmental work, promotion and preservation of diversity, especially religious and gender diversity, is not among their key areas of focus as education providers.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh’s approaches to faith and education are quite distinctive, due both to the historical coexistence of several religious and secular education systems and to the impact on these systems of recent sociopolitical changes.

Since madrasas are the country’s largest faith inspired education providers, this review unpacks differences and similarities across diverse streams of madrasas. The Alia madrasa stream offers an example of successful government intervention through a hybrid religious and secular education system encouraged by state subsidy. Aliya madrasas have achieved gender parity in enrollment in both primary and secondary levels. However, poor educational infrastructure, education quality, and comparatively lower status of their religious education than their Quomi counterparts pose significant challenges to this system. The case study of Tahfizel Qu’ranil Fazil Kamil Madrasa highlights opportunities for innovative experimentation with curriculum and instruction within the system, though these suffer from lack of sustainable support systems and external pressures.

The Quomi madrasas have been successful in recent negotiations with the government that produced recognition of their highest degree, Dawrah Hadith (equivalent to a master’s degree), without any apparent compromise with their autonomous status. Quomi madrasas tend to teach secular subjects up to a grade level (Grade 8), although it is unknown if all Quomi madrasas incorporate secular subjects in their curricula. The emergence of Hefazat as a political power is significant, and it has already influenced the secular state curriculum through its demands for the Islamization of textbooks. The emergence and expansion of state-funded Darul Arqam madrasas in the last few years marks an important juncture in Bangladesh’s madrasa landscape. While the new madrasas have created jobs for both Aliya and Quomi graduates, these Arabic-medium madrasas may oust the resource-starved existing Ebtedayee madrasas.

Education provided by Christian churches and FIOs in Bangladesh has not changed significantly in recent decades. Churches run schools in urban, rural, and hard-to-reach areas. Most follow the national curriculum and enroll students from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. A recent development is the emergence of church-managed English-medium schools for the urban middle class. Christian institutions also conduct both formal and non-formal education programs. Caritas Bangladesh, one of the largest and oldest Christian FIOs, runs large-scale education programs among marginalized populations. However, it currently faces funding shortages, and as a consequence, their education program is experiencing major financial cuts.

Like the churches, several Hindu and Buddhist organizations run schools that follow the national curriculum and are open to all. The government of Bangladesh funds temple-based religious education for Hindu and Buddhist children in select temples around the country. FIOs such as ISKCON offers various forms of age- and gender-differentiated religious education based on Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas. Buddhist temples also run education programs for monks only.

Overall, religious institutions and beliefs play significant roles in Bangladesh's large and complex education system. They are part of current efforts to address challenges of diversity and inclusion. Further, given the significance of interreligious relationships and tensions, they can and often do contribute to better understanding where they are involved. The government of Bangladesh promotes religious education in different ways. Notable developments include the introduction of a separate stream of public madrasas countrywide and reinstatement of funding for temple- and pagoda-based education. Over recent decades, the number of madrasas in Bangladesh has increased significantly. Christian churches maintain their reputation of running quality schools, notwithstanding some concerns and tensions as to their proper role in a Muslim-majority society. Hindu and Buddhist education programs are expanding through the government's temple-based education programs.

The present public school curriculum offers little space for inter- and intra-religious teaching and learning at the primary and secondary levels. Madrasas especially meet both some of the demand for such approaches to education and some of the need. Other religiously designed and managed programs serve specific, minority communities but also offer examples of approaches that address both religious diversity and broader values-inspired educational education. NGOs and various social organizations have introduced such education on a small scale. Overall, approaches explicitly focused on inclusion and diversity have yet to be evaluated in a meaningful way. Education delivered by religious entities, which are remarkably diverse, is affected by issues that confront Bangladesh's education sector as a whole: shortage of resources, management issues, lack of quality control, and structural disparities. In sum, religion-related topics (including the crucial issue of preparing students to live peacefully in a diverse society) warrant further research and policy discussions and interventions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AH Ahle Hadith

AKDN Aga Khan Development Network

AKES Aga Khan Educational Services

BANBEIS Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics

BBA Bangladesh Buddhist Association

BBCS Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha

BBKPS Bangladesh Boudha Kristi Prachar Sangha

BCEBT Bangladesh Catholic Education Board

BEFAQ Befaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh

BIIT Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought

BMEB Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board

BRWT Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust

BTEB Bangladesh Technical Education Board

CB Caritas Bangladesh

CCTB The College of Christian Theology Bangladesh

CHT Chittagong Hill Tracts

CPJ Centre for Peace and Justice

CoB Church of Bangladesh

DAM Dhaka Ahsania Mission

FIOs faith-inspired organizations

HAMIBA Haqqani Mission Bangladesh

HRWT Hindu Religious Welfare Trust

IBBL Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited

IBF Islami Bank Foudation

IBISC Islami Bank International School & College

IoK Islamization of Knowledge

ISKCON International Society for Krishna Conciousness

MAIT Muslim Aid Institute of Technology

MCMEP Mosque-based Children and Mass Education Program

MoC Ministry of Commerce

MoE Ministry of Education

MoPME Ministry of Primary and Mass Education

MoRA Ministry of Religious Affairs

MoSW Ministry of Social Welfare

MWO Mahamandal Welfare Organization

NCFB National Christian Fellowship of Bangladesh

NGOs non-governmental organizations

RMD Ramakrishna Mission Dhaka

SELF Sangha Education Loan Fund

SPSF Sangha Pastors and Students Fund

TTA Theological education by extension

TVET technical and vocational education programs

WFDD World Faiths Development Dialogue

WMPL World Mission Prayer League

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