

Mainstreaming Madrasah Education

As part of the proposed new education policy, reforming the Madrasahs must top the list. But the ulama, as well as Muslim activists and intellectuals, appear to have a different understanding of what it all means. With the Prime Minister laying emphasis on the fact that Madrasah students should be given education under general and vocational curricula, she said the government wants to introduce vocational education, not only in Madrasahs but also at every level of education in order to have a skilled workforce. That being so the Madrasahs need not feel they are being singled out. She said, and rightly, those developing countries like Bangladesh should conduct an all out effort in order to put the nation on a higher plane of development. Madrasah students must receive modern scientific and technological education in order for them to keep pace with today's changed requirements.

Undoubtedly Madrasah education has over the years, provided a service by providing the nation with its spiritual values but as the world advanced, it was not able to meet the economic needs as on completion of his/her stint as a Madrasah student, although a child leaves steeped in religious knowledge, he/she is woefully lacking in the tools needed to earn a living. She said we cannot allow this to continue simply because we have failed to provide a student with a modern, vocational and technical education. Unable to compete in the highly competitive job market, a Madrasah student can only join the ranks of the unemployed. This line of education simply must be upgraded to meet the challenge of the 21st Century. Moreover the rapid growth of lower-level Madrasahs is of concern to the state as they have taken the place of mainstream education.

The main role of the new education policy is to address such vital issues as this so as to narrow down the gap between school and Madrassah education and ensure the widespread application of information technology at all levels. It will also lay emphasis on developing moral values, patriotism, a similar curriculum for all schools and Madrasahs. One of the central issues of the new policy is to have six common subjects for teaching at schools and Madrassahs consistent with other systems of education. Bengali, English, Mathematics, moral studies, social environment and climate change subjects, ICT and sciences, and Bangladesh Studies will be made compulsory.

The inability of the state to provide all-round education to all its young has exacerbated the problem to such a degree that the difference between poor and rich is well marked. Impartial observers have time and again underscored the need for broadening the base of basic education in the country, including that which is on offer at the Madrasahs. That is not to say that Madrasahs have not provided a much needed service or that they have not had a positive impact on the mental growth of children, but by adding science subjects, they can do so much better. Imparting skills alongside gathering knowledge about religion is needed if children are to be grounded for life in the modern world.

A recent study is an eye-opener to the state of ignorance of the majority of our students because it revealed that, since Independence, although primary schools have only doubled in number, Madrasahs have increased eight-fold. This fact alone should awaken us to our responsibilities and we must be more concerned about what is being taught in the Madrasahs. The magnitude of their growth indicates that too many students are getting a type of education that leaves them powerless and unable to compete for jobs in a modern work place. While appreciating the role of Madrasahs in preserving and promoting Muslim identity and in providing education to poor Muslims, the exclusive regime Madrasahs seek to reinforce must now be abandoned, or at least modified so as to ensure children are able to match their peers.

As education can improve the quality of life by enhancing the ability of households to manage health problems, improve nutrition and childcare and plan for the future, it is essential to our economic development. We can no longer afford to cater to three streams, which have divided the nation socially. If we have fallen short of the ideal we must remedy it now as the rural populace is today marginalised. The lack of a meaningful education has prevented people from realising their potential as productive members of society. Education is also an investment for the future but the high cost of sending children to school forced the majority to make do with alternatives and more often than not the alternative was a Madrasah. Successive governments' apathy has succeeded in turning education into a system that has perpetuated the appalling inequity prevailing among the people. Popular among people because it lays emphasis on religion which many feel to be lacking in other schools, the lack of a knowledge of physical sciences and subjects that help create the kind of human resource a nation needs in the 21st Century, has kept students from getting ahead in the modern world. As emerging sectors of the economy have created a need for specialised education, the case for the government to reorient its policies in favour of broad-basing the system is strong.