



Madrasah Fire And Related Questions

Saturday's fire at a Demra-based madrasah-cum-orphanage, which burnt to death seven children and left more than a hundred others with various degrees of burn injuries, raises many basic questions about the state of so-called charitable and semi-charitable religious-education-institutions in Bangladesh. The inmates, ranging from five to seventeen (to go by the casualties exposed by the tragic incident) were locked in by the madrasah authorities at night, which, in their limited understanding, was a means to ensure safety and security for the girls. But there seemed to be no provisions at all for emergency needs, no caretaker whatsoever who could have acted speedily to prevent so many deaths.

Has the state no responsibility to see that children in boardings such as these have the minimum physical and psychological protection from natural and unnatural hazards? The sad fact is governments have generally been indifferent to what children's schools, madrasahs, orphanages—and even so-called English medium establishments—have been doing in the name of imparting education, be it religious or secular. Bangladesh's pledge to the Child Right Convention is scarcely reflected in the physical and mental inputs that assorted educational institutions are permitted to give to children.

The gaps are glaring in all kinds of institutions, from the moneyed to the modest. The razed Jamia Islamia Ashraf-ul-Ulum Women's (?) Madrasah and Orphanage, which catered to the needs of the economically and socially disadvantaged children, may have suffered the natural neglect that is the wont of the poor. After all, who cares what they get, or do not get, in life?

But the same applies to not-so-poor institutions as well. Consider the state of the growing number of secular middle-class schools (Bangla and English medium included) where questionable standards of curriculum, methods of instruction and physical infrastructure are the norm. One must wonder whether a state education authority at all exists. And if it does, is it up to the task of setting a minimum general standard for all schools and madrasahs? This nation's biggest drawback is in fact the great 'poverty of understanding' in this crucial area.

Unless positive change in attitude and outlook can be brought about in those who take decisions on what should be imparted as education, and how, the future of our children is bound to be insecure. We may prevent death from fire through better physical facilities, but how do we overhaul the mind-deadening methods of teaching that are employed in most of these institutions?