

The Role of Indian Madrasahs in Providing Access to Mainstream Education for Muslim Minority Students: A West Bengal Experience

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Abstract The paper discusses educational constitutional provisions for minorities in India, especially for Muslims. It also portrays the development and contribution of the Madrasah system, particularly in West Bengal, with special reference to efforts made by the West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education to bring Muslim children into the national system of education. Based on a survey administered in some *madrasahs*, the paper also highlights some aspects of their functioning as well as the problems that they are facing. The authors conclude by arguing that such an initiative could inspire other states in India aiming at providing better access to formal education among marginalized groups.

Résumé Cet article présente les protections consenties par la Constitution indienne en matière d'éducation aux minorités, et particulièrement aux musulmans. Il dresse également un portrait du développement et de la contribution du système des *madrasahs*, notamment dans l'État du West Bengal, en accordant une attention particulière aux efforts faits par le West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education afin de favoriser l'intégration des élèves musulmans au système national d'éducation. En se basant sur une étude quantitative menée dans plus de deux cents *madrasahs*, l'article illustre également divers aspects de leur fonctionnement ainsi que les problèmes auxquels elles font face. En conclusion, les auteurs font valoir qu'une telle initiative pourrait inspirer d'autres États en Inde qui ont pour objectif de fournir un meilleur accès à l'éducation formelle au sein des groupes marginalisés.

Keywords Madrasah · Muslims · India · West Bengal · Mainstream education

Mots clés Madrasah · musulmans · Inde · West Bengal · éducation formelle

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Introduction

India is a country of diversities inhabited by various ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious groups. The Indian Constitution defines the term ‘minority’ on the basis of the two criteria, viz. religion and language. The National Commission for Minorities in India has identified Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsees which constitute 18.8% of the total population of the country as religious minorities, whilst Hindus are the majority group (census of Government of India 2001). Among these various minorities, Muslims occupy an important position in Indian society. The 2009 CIA World Fact Book data put the Muslim population in India at 156, 254, 615. Muslims are found all over India, but they are largely concentrated in 12 states where the Muslim population is more than 10% of the state population. More than half of India’s Muslims are concentrated in the northern ‘Hindi heartland’ and West Bengal.

Education is one of the most powerful factors for the political, social, economic or spiritual development of individuals and communities. It helps individuals to acquire the confidence and capability to match the levels of those who are in the mainstream in society. Accordingly, the Indian Constitution promises ‘equality of opportunity’ for education for all. It also offers all citizens social, economic and political justice and equality of status and opportunity. In addition, Article 29 of the Constitution grants the minorities the right to conserve their language, script, and culture. It further grants the religious minorities ‘the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice’ (Article 30.1). Articles 350 (A) advocates instruction in the mother tongue at primary stage, and Article 350 (B) directs the state to safeguard the linguistic interests.

In India, for historical and sociological reasons, certain sections of the population are lagging behind in the educational field—this includes some religious minorities and marginalised groups defined on the basis of castes and of their belonging to various tribes. Whilst the situation of the latter groups, named in India Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes,¹ has been widely documented (Chatterjee 2000), it is only relatively recently that the educational backwardness of some religious minorities has been discussed. For example, in 1980, a ‘High-powered panel on Minorities’ was appointed by the Ministry of Home Affairs, which identified Muslims and Neo-Buddhists as the “educationally backward sections of the society”. The National Policy on Education 1986 also endorsed it, after which concerted efforts were made to spread education among these left out groups. The educational

¹ Schedule Castes (SC) and Schedule Tribes (ST): At different stages of educational development, a large chunk of population remained socially disadvantaged from formal education for a long time in the country. These concerns are reflected in the Indian Constitution and are contained in the directive principles of state policy. The 5th Schedule of the Constitution is devoted to protect the interest of SC/ST and backward communities. For the elevation of these groups, they are given many benefits like stipends, scholarships, free tuition, and monetary aid for books, stationery and free accommodations in hostels. Certain percentage of seats is also reserved in educational institutions and jobs in government and public sector. These benefits are given on the basis of castes (SC/ST) and not on the basis of religion. Article 46 of the Constitution directs the state to create and promote with special care for providing educational facilities and safeguard the economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

and economic development of this section of the population and bringing them in mainstream education are crucial for achieving major national goals, *i.e.* the universalisation of elementary and secondary education. However, studies reveal that social disparities in the utilisation of and participation in educational opportunities continue to persist, though the magnitude of the disparities between and among different segments of population has decreased.

In 2006, a ‘Prime Minister’s High level Committee’ was set up on the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community of India under the chairmanship of Justice Rajindar Sachar. Known as the Sachar Committee Report (2006), it confirmed that by most development indicators, the Muslim community is lagging behind other religious groups of India. The community is relatively poor, illiterate, has lower access to education, lower representation in public and private sector jobs, and lower availability of bank credit for self-employment. In urban areas, the community mostly lives in slums characterised by poor municipal infrastructure.

As we know, literacy is the first step in learning and knowledge building, and therefore, an essential indicator of human development. The report especially confirms that Muslims are lagging behind in literacy (Fig. 1). According to Census 2001, the Muslim literacy rate is 59.13% and is found to be lower than that for Hindus, 65.09%, the majority religious group. However, among all the states and within the states (inter-district, inter-block, male and female), large disparities were observed. There are few states where the Muslim literacy rate is very low, *i.e.* below 50%. On the other hand, there are states like Jharkhand, Karnataka and Maharashtra in which literacy rates among Muslims are higher than the state average (Fig. 1). This makes it evident that state-level educational policies and initiatives can lead to an elevation of Muslim education.

The Education of Muslims in India: Problems and Issues

The Indian educational system is divided into pre-primary (or nursery), primary, secondary (or high school), and higher secondary. Primary school education includes children of ages 6 to 11, organised into classes 1 to 5. Lower secondary and secondary school pupils, aged between 11 and 16, are organised into classes 6 to 10, and higher secondary school students (17, 18) are enrolled in classes 11 and 12. Up to the secondary level, all the students are taught a uniform set of subjects including

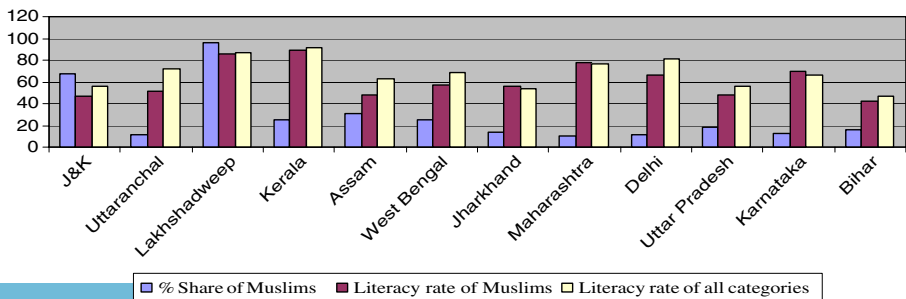


Fig. 1 Percentage share of Muslim population and literacy rates

languages, mathematics, sciences and social sciences. All the children irrespective of caste, creed and religion can study in these schools—so Muslims can access these schools too. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the Indian Constitution provides the right for minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice—thus, Muslims also have minority-managed schools which usually teach the general curriculum.

During centuries of Muslim rule in India, particularly during the two centuries of the Mughal period, a network of thousands of educational institutions was built up across the country. These institutions are generally known as Madrasahs, including Maktabas which are at the lowest rung of the education system in operation and are meant for an elementary Islamic education. These are mostly attached to the mosques, but many of them are running in private establishments. Earlier, financial donations were given to Madrasahs by local Muslim populations, but in the course of its development, the state government has also patronised Madrasah education with some financial and academic support.

Besides giving an acceptable religious education, Madrasahs are a means of providing access to education to the low socioeconomic population—which explains their acceptance, existence and expansion. The number of Madrasahs in India is estimated to be 30,000 to 40,000. To make Madrasah education more acceptable, various efforts have been made by the government to modernise the system. The High Power Panel on Minorities (1980) and the Group on Minorities Education (1990) set up by the Department of Education advocates relevant changes in the curriculum. The National Policy on Education (1986) and Programme of Action (1992) and the Prime Minister's 15 Point Programme for Welfare of Minorities suggested the modernisation of traditional Madrasahs, and the 'Scheme of Modernization of Madrasah' was launched as a centrally sponsored scheme in 1994 suggesting the introduction as an addition of English, Science, Mathematics and Hindi subjects on a voluntary basis.

In 2004, the Standing Committee of 'National Monitoring Committee for Minorities' was constituted. Its primary aim was to know the difficulties that were being faced by the minorities in the field of education, and whether or not the schemes run/introduced by the central government for the educational elevation of the minorities were being properly dealt with by the provincial/local government. In one of its recommendations, the committee suggested a way of introducing modern education in Madrasahs without disturbing their regular affairs.

The Madrasah education has been formally linked with the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). NIOS is a government-funded examining body which provides distance mode education to children missing out at elementary and secondary level and has nationwide coverage. NIOS, in selected states, now conducts examinations in modern subjects introduced to Madrasah students and awards certificates to the students. NIOS also gives courseware and certification to good quality need-based vocational courses, for example the "Hunar" Vocational Project for Muslim girls in the State of Bihar.

The studies conducted in India reveal that the reason for Muslims opting for Madrasahs was lack of access to other educational facilities nearby. Saxena (1983), in his study on Moradabad town, observed that most of the regular schools were located in the non-Muslim localities. According to Jeffery and Jeffery (2000), the

situation is no better in rural areas. In addition, because of low socioeconomic status, Muslim children are joining Madrasahs, as Madrasahs are providing free education and often residential facilities too. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) mentioned in detail the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community of India. The report found that Muslim parents are not averse to modern or mainstream education and to sending their children to the affordable regular schools. They do not want to send their children only to Madrasahs if other schools are accessible and affordable. A section of Muslims prefers education through English as the language of instruction, whilst some prefer Urdu.

Participation of Muslim girls in educational activities has been studied by Hassan and Menon (2004) who found that very few Muslim women in India are in high-profile jobs. The study reveals that less than 15% of Muslim women report themselves to be working. With the exception of those in a higher economic stratum, the regional picture, too, reflects the national trend of low women's work participation. The proportion of non-working women is huge irrespective of place of residence or region. Generally, Muslim women are self-employed or engaged in home-based labour, probably the most exploited category of work other than bonded labour. This leads to a huge dropout of Muslim girls from schools. However, studies reveal that parents have some acceptance of flexi time in girls' Madrasahs/Makhtabs and distance education options.

The Sachar Committee Report (2006) also reflects the same feeling that parents feel that education is not important for girls. Even if girls are enrolled, they are withdrawn at an early age to marry them off. This leads to a higher dropout rate among Muslim girls. Indicators show that the problem may lie in the non-availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, absence of female teachers and non-availability of scholarships as they move up the education ladder. According to Alam (2007), although the Muslim community is represented in primary school in accordance with its percentage share in the total population, its representation in secondary schools is much lower.

In general, the reasons accounting for the educational backwardness of Muslims are: (a) historical and religious factors (Faridi 1965; Baig 1974; Sharma 1978); (b) a 'minority complex' including latent discrimination against Muslims by wider (Smith 1963; Malhotra 1973) and (c) socioeconomic backwardness (Ahmad 1981; Jain 1986; Hamid 1987; Mondal 1977; Ansari 2001; Engineer 2001). However, it should be noted the literature dealing with the educational backwardness of Muslims is by and large impressionistic and speculative, reflecting more the general impression of the observer. As a result, most of the writings on this subject in the post-independence period are not only inadequate but are also by and large one-sided (Phadke 1978).

The Education in West Bengal and the Role of Madrasahs

The Present Educational Scenario in West Bengal

West Bengal is one of the educationally well-developed states in comparison with other states of India. Its literacy rate is higher than the national average for both

males and females. According to the census of Government of India (2001), the overall literacy rate of India is 65.4%, 75.85% for male and 54.16% for females. West Bengal's literacy rate is 69.22%, of which the male literacy rate is 77.58% and female is 60.22%.

But there are some highly Muslim-populated sections in the state where the literacy rate is found to be quite dismal. As per census of Government of India (2001),² 25% of the population in the state is Muslim. Their literacy rate is 57.5% with a significant difference between male (64.6%) and female (49.7%). This illustrates that in comparison to the total literacy rate of the state, the literacy rate of Muslims is very low. It reveals that there is a large gap between the total literacy rate of the state and literacy rate of Muslims, *i.e.* 11.72%. In West Bengal, among Muslims, 50% of males and 67% of the females are never enrolled in the education system. With these discounted, the male and female literacy of the state and the male and female literacy rate of Muslims are quite high. In this context, it is surprising to note that the gap between male and female literacy rate of Muslims, as compared with male and female literacy rate of West Bengal, is found slightly larger than females. The gap for male literacy rate is 27.38% and for female literacy gap is 27.32%. It shows that Muslim females in the state are gradually overtaking their male counterparts in the educational field.

After more than six decades of the Independence of India, one of the reasons for the low level of literacy rate is that at the time of independence, Bengal was divided into two parts, West Bengal and East Pakistan. Part of West Bengal remained with India. Leaving behind downtrodden rural and uneducated Muslims, well-placed middle class Bengali Muslims opted out and shifted to East Pakistan. Not only education but the economy also suffered during partition. Most of the jute growing land went into East Pakistan, resulting in the stagnation of the jute industry in West Bengal. Refugee rehabilitation and other associated problems, rather than education, demanded the immediate attention of the government.

After independence, adequate measures have been taken in the state for creating a society free from exploitation of any type, devoid of communal disturbances, of fundamentalism, social segregation and socioeconomic injustice and inequities. But equity and equality need some more time to become visible. Efforts to improve the situation are being encouraged and supported by adopting innovative strategies in education of Muslims.

The Situation of Madrasahs: Historical Background and Current Situation

The Madrasah education system in West Bengal is very old and unique. It was started with the advent of the Muslim rule during the medieval period when Madrasahs were the prominent centres of learning. It had a turning point with the takeover of India by the East India Company and subsequently with the establishment of the Calcutta Madrasah in 1780 during British rule by Warren Hastings for the education of Muslim students for imparting training for recruitment as government servants. Subsequently, many changes and developments were

² All the tables presented in this paper can be found at www.censusindia.net; www.census.gov.in.

introduced in the Calcutta Madrasah including the introduction of English education, medical education, etc.

In 1915, some subjects of general education like History Geography and English in addition to Islamic studies were introduced into Madrasahs. The Madrasahs, where these new subjects were introduced, were called the New Madrasahs or High Madrasahs.³ At the same time, some Madrasahs continued under the earlier pattern of traditional education and were known as Senior Madrasahs. Different Boards were entrusted with the responsibility to conduct the examinations of High Madrasahs and Senior Madrasahs. The Board of Islamic Intermediate and University of Dacca used to conduct the High Madrasah examinations, and the Board of Central Madrasah, which was established in 1927, conducted examinations of Senior Madrasahs. The Board of Central Madrasah used to conduct three types of examinations, namely Junior (Alim), Senior (Fazil) and Title (Mumtazul Muhammadin), respectively, after 6, 8 and 10 years of study. The same situation continued until 1947 when India was partitioned and attained independence.

After partition, the main Board was shifted to Dacca (then East Pakistan and now Bangladesh) and an interim Board named West Bengal Madrasah Education Board was set up in Hoogly. In 1964, this Board was renamed West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education (WBBME). In 1994, the WBBME was given an autonomous status and made equal to the other State Education Boards of India. The total numbers of Madrasahs under WBBME are 508. These are of three types: junior high (167), high Madrasahs (238), and senior Madrasahs (103). Out of junior high and high Madrasahs, ten are for boys, 20 are for girls, and the rest are co-education. Management wise, their bifurcation is very distinctive. They impart the same syllabus and textbooks as prescribed by the mainstream Boards of Education.

As an additional subject, Arabic is compulsory as a third language in WBBME Madrasahs. This equivalence with respect to educational standards brings Madrasah students at par with students of general education with respect to admission to higher studies as well as in the field of employment—thus putting the Madrasah graduates in the educational mainstream for continuing into higher/professional universities or jobs after a Madrasah certification.

³ West Bengal Madrasah Education Board also conducts Senior Madrasahs' exams. The Senior Madrasahs are 103 in number and have four stages where traditional education of religion and Arabic are given: (1) Alim stage includes ten classes, and the subjects are Arabic, Hadith, Tafir, Figh and Faraid. In order to forge a closer affinity with the secondary stage, a number of basic subjects such as Mathematics, Physical Science, Life Science, History, Geography, with mother tongue, *i.e.* Bengali or Urdu and English, are also added. The external examination has also been declared as equivalent to the secondary examination, and the students of this stage are thus eligible for admission to higher secondary courses in and outside of the state. (2) Next is the Fazil stage which is for 2 years, the dominant language being Arabic, with theology being the subject of study. Fazil is not recognised by the Higher Secondary Council as equivalent to higher secondary. But those candidates, who pass Fazil Examination with English as an additional subject, are considered eligible for admission to the pre-university (Arts) course of the University of Calcutta. Subsequently, the WBCHSE allowed such students to be admitted to class XI in a higher secondary school. (3) The third stage is known as Kamil and is not recognised by any University since the course is dominantly theology-oriented. (4) The last and highest stage is known as Mumtazul Muhammadin, popularly known as the P.G. course; this is also not recognised by any university. The course content is only theology. The WBBME conducts ALIM, Fazil and M.M. examinations at the end of class X, Fazil 2nd year, Kamil 2nd year and M.M. 2nd year.

West Bengal has a history of a stable state government which has helped in nurturing this Muslim education initiative with fairness. The state government and the board keep close contact with the Madrasahs and check they impart democratic and secular education to the students, thus helping to keep the students in line with the national educational mainstream and not restricted to knowledge of religion. For this mainstreaming, all efforts are made to oversee the student graduating from the West Bengal Madrasah Board is equipped with traditional religious knowledge along with the right mix of modern subjects and values like secularism, tolerance and skills of living in the rich diverse culture of India.

Description of the Research and Results

The objectives of the research reported in this paper were to explore:

- the Madrasah education system in West Bengal under the WBBME;
- the changes that have come up during the years and identify areas where support is needed;
- how the Madrasah education system in West Bengal is helpful in mainstreaming children in the education system.

In our general study, we focused only on high Madrasahs. Out of a potential sample of 238 high Madrasahs that currently exist in West Bengal, more than 20% have been selected (Table 1). Out of them, 6% are girls' Madrasahs, 18% are boys' Madrasahs, and the remaining 76% are co-educational Madrasahs. Seventy percent Madrasahs from the selected sample were from rural areas and the remaining 27% from urban areas that are distributed in 15 districts.

In addition, we carried more in-depth observations and data collection on which the present paper is based in 24 of those Madrasahs situated in Malda and Murshidabad districts. We selected these two districts because they are the two most highly Muslim-populated districts of West Bengal: Malda has nearly 50% Muslim population, and Murshidabad has about 64% Muslim population (Table 2). Also, giving the sometimes difficult access to very remote regions where the Madrasahs are often situated, it was felt that concentrating efforts in these two districts would be more convenient.

Table 1 Location and type-wise Madrasahs selected

Location/Type-wise	Number	Percentage
Rural	35	73.00
Urban	13	27.00
Total	48	100.00
Exclusively girls	3	6.00
Exclusively boys	9	18.00
Co-educational	36	76.00
Total	48	100.00

Table 2 Number of Madrasahs selected: district-wise

Sl. no.	Name of the district	Total population in the district 2001 Census	% of Muslim population	Number of school selected
1	Birbhumii	3,012,546	35.12	1
2	Burdwan	6,919,698	19.71	1
3	Cooch Behar	2,478,280	24.25	1
4	Darjeeling	1,605,900	5.32	1
6	Hooghly	5,040,047	15.15	2
7	Howrah	4,274,010	24.44	1
8	Kolkata	4,580,544	20.23	1
9	Malda	3,290,160	49.73	13
10	Murshidabad	5,863,717	63.70	11
11	Nadia	4,603,756	25.42	2
12	North Dinajpur	2,441,824	47.36	1
13	North 24 parganas	8,930,295	24.23	3
14	South 24 Parganas	6,909,015	33.23	6
15	Medinipur	2,441,824	47.36	4

Distribution of Students

The proportion of children attending school/Madrasah is one of the crucial indicators of participation in and utilisation of educational opportunities. Table 3 reveals that enrolment at the secondary level has been increased considerably from 2000 to 2004. During 2000, enrolment in the selected Madrasahs was 40, 878, which has increased to 58, 733 over 5 years. The position of girls, Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) children in the Madrasahs, is also quite revealing from the table. It shows that although there are large number of co-educational Madrasahs and exclusively boys' Madrasahs, the enrolment of girls in the Madrasahs is increasing as compared with boys from 2000 to 2004. The male students outnumbered female students in the year 2000, but after 5 years (*i.e.* in 2004), the enrolment of girl students increased in comparison to boys (this increase could be because of the special targeted efforts for girl's enrolment and retention initiatives done by central government funding from 2001). Table 3 also reveals that the Madrasahs represent mainly Muslim students.

Table 3 Percentage distribution of enrolment of girls, SC/ST and others

Year	Total enrolment	% of Boys	% of Girls	From total enrolment		
				% of Muslims	% of SC/ST	% of Others
2000	40878	51.44	49.56	97.72	1.37	00.90
2004	58733	45.08	54.92	97.81	1.37	00.81

The percentage of SC/ST and enrolment of other students is low as compared to the enrolment of Muslim students.

Teachers

The teachers are recruited in Madrasahs on the basis of recommendation by the State Body—The School Service Commission (SSC). The Education Department through respective District Inspector of Schools thereafter accords approval to such appointment. Table 4 reveals that from 2000 to 2004, the number of teachers in the selected Madrasahs has increased from 627 to 666. Considering the gender ratio, Table 4 shows that 9.57% and 10.81% teachers, respectively, in the years 2000 and 2004 are females. Out of them, 97% are from girls' Madrasahs for both years. This shows that very few female teachers are recruited in the co-educational or in boys' Madrasahs. Table 4 also indicates that teachers are mostly from the Muslim community. Though teacher selection is done through SSC, other community teachers rarely choose Madrasahs for job. The breakdown by community of the data for teachers in selected Madrasahs shows that during 2000, 86.44% teachers were from the Muslim community, 7.97% teachers were from SC/ST and 5.58% were from other communities. After 5 years, *i.e.* in 2004, the ratio was somewhat changed. The Muslim percentage of teachers in the Madrasahs decreased from 86.44% to 81.53%. On the other hand, the SC/ST and other community percentage increased to 10.81% and 7.66%, respectively.

Teacher/Pupil Ratio

The perusal of Table 5 reveals that the number of teachers is not increasing in the same proportion as the enrolment increase—resulting in increased teacher/pupil ratio. Table 4 shows that there is a one and half times increase in enrolment over a period of 5 years (from 40,878 in 2000 to 58,733 in 2004), but the number of teachers (Table 5) did not increase at the same rate (627 in 2000 to 666 in 2004). Therefore, pupil/teacher ratio increased from 1:66 to 1:88 from the years 2000 to 2004. This is much above the standard norm of 1:40 and could affect the quality of teaching.

Gender and Community Distribution of Headteachers

The data of selected Madrasahs show that only three Madrasahs have female heads and that two are in girls' Madrasahs. This indicates primarily that Madrasahs are

Table 4 Percentage distributions of teacher

Year	Total teachers	Total female teachers	% of Female teachers in girl's Madrasahs	From total number of teachers		
				% of Muslims teachers	% of SC/ST teachers	% of Other teachers
2000	627	60 (9.57)	97.00	86.44	7.97	5.58
2004	666	72(10.81)	97.00	81.53	10.81	7.66

Table 5 Teacher/pupil ratio

Year	Teacher/pupil ratio
2000	1:66
2004	1:88

headed by males. In addition, the data show that the heads of Madrasahs are mostly from the Muslim community. Out of 48 selected Madrasahs, only one institution has a non-Muslim headmaster.

Selection of Headteachers in Madrasahs

In West Bengal, through the SSC, principal/headteachers/teachers are recruited in the government schools through open selection. A pool of teachers is selected by this organisation, and the selected teachers are assigned to schools by the SSC according to demand. The criteria of selection to the post of headteacher for Madrasahs include academic and professional qualifications and experience. They should have a postgraduate qualification with a Bachelor of Education degree (professional degree). All Madrasahs are following similar norms for the recruitment of headteachers to those other mainstream secondary schools are observing.

The age profile of the headteachers in the selected sample shows that 6% of the headteachers are below 40, 15% are from the 40–45 age group, 17% are from the 45–50 age group, 29 from the 50–55 age group, and those above 55 are 3%. This shows that generally senior teachers hold the post of heads in Madrasahs (Table 6). The data also reveal another noteworthy point that one third per cent of headteachers will retire in the next 5 years (on attaining the retirement age of 60 years). Thus, the systems should be ready to take appropriate steps for timely recruitment.

Qualifications

Table 7 indicates that most headteachers are well qualified. They have postgraduate degrees with a teacher training degree; only 1% of heads are graduates with a Bachelor of Education degrees. However, for the headteachers, the Bachelor of Education degree is essential even then; about 10% heads are untrained. It was also found that none of the headteachers has doctoral degree/PhD.

Table 6 Age-wise percentage distribution of headteachers

S. no.	Age groups	Number	Percentage
1	<40	3	6
2	40–45	7	14
3	45–50	8	16
4	50–55	14	29
5	55>	16	33

Table 7 Educational qualification of headteachers

S. no	Educational qualification	Number	Percentage
1	Graduate only	–	–
2	Postgraduate only	5	10.41
3	Graduate with B. Ed.	2	4.17
4	Postgraduate with B. Ed.	41	85.42
5	PhD	–	–
	M.Ed	–	–

Staff Development Programmes of Headteachers

The schools that have good leadership are able to cope with the changes—thus, staff development programmes are essential for leadership and other developments in administrative quality. Table 8 shows that the West Bengal Board of the Secondary Education (WBBSE) imparts in-service training programmes on academic, administration and extension activities to the heads of Madrasahs. The WBBSE organises programmes in collaboration with the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), the National Council of Education Research Training, the State Council Educational Research and Training, the West Bengal Board of Primary Education, the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, the West Bengal Council for Higher Secondary and Rabindra Mukht Vidhyalaya. The selected headteachers of Madrasahs under the study have attended 58 academic, 103 administrative and 150 extension programmes during the last 10 years.

When the principals were asked by the authors about their requirements and what type of training programme they needed, the majority of the headteachers requested orientation programmes in academic (67% headteachers) and administrative (77% headteachers) areas and in modern technology (58% headteachers). According to them, the training would help them improve student learning. This shows that though many headteachers are trained, still they felt the need of the repeated training or orientation programmes.

Inspection and Supervision in the Madrasahs

Inspection and supervision are essential tools for ensuring the efficiency of a system and accountability of individuals. Both inspection and supervision are continuous

Table 8 Type and number of training programmes attended

S. no	Types of training	Number
1	Academic	58
2	Administrative	103
3	Extension	150

processes for evaluating the efforts of students and teachers and improving the teaching–learning processes. They generally motivate and equip the teachers for effective instruction and are concerned with the progress and improvement of all activities of the school.

The inspection and supervision in WBBSE is of two types: external and internal. For external supervision, District Inspector of Schools and subordinate Inspecting Officers are responsible. Sometimes, the board officials directly supervise the Madrasahs. Internal supervision is conducted by headteachers, and teachers selected by headteachers, to see what is happening in classrooms, libraries, laboratories and throughout the school, whilst external supervision is done by the District Inspector of Schools. Both internal and external evaluations are important for the improvement of quality of school.

The frequency of external supervision is shown in Table 9. It is seen that 26% of Madrasahs were inspected once; 18% Madrasahs had surprise visits. Twelve per cent of headteachers reported that inspection has never taken place. Forty-four per cent did not respond to the question. Although inspection and supervision are important activities, they are not regular features in the Madrasahs.

Role of Teachers in Inspection and Supervision

Inspection and supervision should help teachers improve their capacities. When teachers are involved in internal or external supervision, they learn by observing other teachers' classes and they come to know about other innovative activities. Tables 10 and 11 show that in the selected sample, very few teachers were involved in the external and internal supervision in the Madrasahs. If we look at the total number of teachers (666), this number seems to be very nominal.

Madrasah Complex: Learning to Live Together

The notion of the school complex has been conceived with the aim of harmonising the learning process, material and streams as well as effecting a balanced development of the learner's consciousness as much as possible. A school complex may be formed comprising all the high, junior high and higher secondary schools within a specified geographical or administrative periphery.

The concept of school complex can be of great help as a supplementary system to make up for the deficiencies that exist. It is a fact that schools of the same area are deficient in different respects. Some are lacking libraries and laboratories whilst

Table 9 Frequencies of external inspection and supervision

Number of time	No. of Madrasahs (in %)
Only once	26
Surprise visit	18
Never done	12
No. response	44

Table 10 Number of teacher involved in external inspection

No. of teacher	No. of times involved
1	2
2	4
3	15
4	21
5	1
8	1
No response	4

others lack playgrounds, etc. As an innovative step, the Madrasah Board divided all the Madrasahs into 71 school complexes. As the concept of school complex is very new to the headteachers, they desire to have regular networking training (Table 12) on how to get support from neighbouring Madrasahs so that they can properly utilise the infrastructure facilities (library, laboratory, playground, etc.) as well as other facilities like the exchange of expert teachers from the neighbouring Madrasahs, the moderation of question papers, etc. This concept also teaches them about learning to live together.

Linkages with Parents/Community

Table 13 shows that headteachers of the selected sample mentioned educational workshops for parents and communities to be organised so that linkages between Madrasahs and communities can be established and support from parents and community can be solicited in running the Madrasahs effectively.

The Madrasah heads feel that parents can be supportive in the regular monitoring of their children (65%). Twenty-five per cent of heads favour financial, physical and psychological support from the community. If they are well aware about the problems of health hazards and drug addictions, they can try to keep their children away from them—50% of heads observed the need for such training. But 31% of Madrasah heads (31%) also feel that on academic matters, parents and community members should not interfere.

Table 11 Number of teachers involved in internal inspection

No. of teacher	No. of times involved
2	5
3	11
4	7
5	3
8	2
No response	20

Table 12 Support needed from school complex

S. no	Suggestion	Frequency (in %)
1	Common use of library, laboratory and playgrounds	52
2	Common admissions and examinations in the Madrasah complex	65
3	Exchange of expert teachers	29
4	Moderation of questions setting	19

Discussion

The study done for the present paper reveals that Madrasah education in India (which has been so sidelined and considered as religious education only) can contribute positively to provide a better access to quality education for rural and low socioeconomic population besides Muslim students. All these can be possible if the State Government of West Bengal takes positive steps and help in providing status and bridges to mainstream Education by constituting and nurturing the WBBME.

The paper highlights that the reason for higher percentage of Muslim students in Madrasahs of WBBME is not only because these are Muslim community initiative institutions but also because Madrasahs are generally located in the area of high concentration of Muslim population and the children do not have many options to choose from due to the non-availability of other schools in close vicinity.

It is evident from the study that the Madrasah administration does not give enough representation to women and is tilted towards male dominance. Women administrators or school heads are very few in number and are only heading the girls' Madrasahs. None of the boys' Madrasahs or co-educational Madrasahs is headed by a woman principal. However, in order to increase enrolment of Muslims in the state, particularly the enrolment of girls, it is urgently needed to recruit more women heads in the Madrasahs and more women teachers.

The study also reveals that the participation of Muslim girls at secondary level has increased in comparison to boys. It is an encouraging trend and shows that girls are moving out of *pardah* (veil), which is a symbol of segregation and seclusion. The reasons for a decrease in the boys' enrolment need further investigation. Focus group discussions during the study, pointed out that Muslim boys frequently dropped out early for work, and girls who managed to reach high school were made to discontinue because an 'overqualified' woman is unmarriageable.

Table 13 Educational workshop needed for parents and community

S. no	Suggestion	Frequency (in %)
1	To keep away from health hazards and drug addictions	50
2	Regular meetings to establish linkages between Madrasah and communities	50
3	Regular monitoring of their children	65
4	Financial/physical/psychological support	25
5	Non-interference in the academic function	31

Another revealing fact observed was that under WBBME, Madrasahs are generally established in rural areas and all these Madrasahs are government-aided. They receive aid from government only for the teachers' salaries. They hardly get any other of the finances which are essential for the teaching–learning process and for the quality improvement of Madrasah education. Therefore, because of lack of these facilities (play grounds, furniture, libraries, toilets, etc.) and in the absence of quality improvement funds, Madrasahs are struggling hard to compete with other schools.

To provide professional support to Madrasahs, 'school complexes' have been created by the WBBME. It appears that the existing complexes are not very functional and much more is expected and desired from them by the school heads. Some of the headteachers mentioned that most of the 'lead schools' only provide for the use of their physical facilities, and other equipment and hardly any senior teacher of the lead school give any academic guidance and suggestions to teachers and heads of the schools which are part of that complex. This needs serious attention.

The headteachers also felt that the community could contribute and participate in the planning and management of Madrasahs through the Managing Committee, Village Education Committee, Mother–Teacher Association and Parent–Teacher Association to solve the day-to-day problem of the Madrasahs. Therefore, the training of Management Committees/Village Education Committees for effective support needs to be organised. The proper use of school complexes alongside community and school linkages should transform the relationship among the Board, the Madrasahs and the community members.

Supervision, which is a basis for improving the teaching–learning process, could also be strengthened with the help of Madrasah complexes. Therefore, proper guidance and training are needed for developing the culture of the school complex-based supervision.

The most important step for the heads of Madrasahs is to have exposure to the field of planning and management; therefore, they need capacity-building programmes. These programmes should be well designed according to a through training need assessment. The challenge is that every Madrasah headteacher should develop his/her staff development blueprint comprising areas of training and mechanism for capacity building for every individual staff member as well as for himself/herself. Based on this training needs analysis, the capacity-building programmes need to be organised at complex level, at district or state level.

The study highlights the important initiative being taken by the West Bengal Madrasah Board in giving an equal chance to the deprived Muslim population for getting the same level and quality education as the other sections of the society. These Madrasahs are trying to provide quality education at the state and national level and also offering access for education to children of all caste, creed and religion. Due to equivalence of certification, the Madrasah graduates can now pursue further studies at any university in the country or get a job without any bias.

Taking the example of West Bengal, other states in India could also follow the same path. The initiative would help to safeguard the constitutional and legal rights of minorities who are lagging behind in the educational field. It will also help in achieving the long-cherished goals of universalisation of elementary and secondary education. The Right to Education Act—recently passed by Indian Parliament—also needs such initiatives to provide acceptable, equal and quality education to all.

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