The Cultural Production of an "Employable Person":

A Case of Madrasa Students in West Bengal, India

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1. Introduction

Education as a "social good" (Dréze and Sen 1995; Sen 1999) has come to increasingly dominate the imaginations of development theorists, development practitioners, policy makers, and the general population at large. It is widely believed to allow disadvantaged groups greater upward mobility, and in so doing, level social inequalities (Dréze and Sen 1995). Dovetailing this growing public consensus around education as an effective development strategy, madrasas (Islamic Seminaries) are increasingly being reformed across South Asia [1] with the intended aim of mainstreaming its marginalized Muslim population. Despite the growing political rhetoric, policy recommendations, and budgetary allowances (see DFID 2008; WB 2009) in the direction of reforms in madrasas, there has been no serious attempt to understand how such rhetoric and related policy is experienced at the ground level. In my research I make a first attempt at opening this 'black box' by conducting qualitative research with graduate and post-graduate students and alumni from the

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[1] Reform is through curriculum modification (through introduction of non-theological courses to varying extents), and/or degree recognition and degree equivalence (to mainstream education).

recently reformed *Aliah* University (erstwhile Calcutta Madrasa) in West Bengal, India.

I find that far from being the promised agent of change, the reformed madrasa (here *Aliah* University) continues the existing social, political and economic order. The majority of the *Aliah* graduates are unable to obtain stable, white-collar employment and access the promised social mobility. This observation is consistent with the work of sociologists who have long critiqued the ability of education to facilitate positive social transformation in the context of disparate power (see Bourdieu 1977, Gramsci 1971, Illich 1972; for the current South Asian context see Jeffrey *et al* 2008). However, it is not that societal structures are *wholly* reproduced and the *Aliah* students simply resume their original marginal position in the pecking order of the society. The reproduction is challenged, even if only partially, by the changing cultural subjectivities of the students. Even as the students fail to access the promised benefits of education, the *Aliah* educated youth are *resisting*, and not just wholly reproducing, the domination of powerful structures and signaling social change by culturally producing their own subjectivities, styles and valuations (Levinson *et al* 1996, Willis 1977). The *Aliah* students, like the 'lads' in Paul Willis' famous ethnographic study in Industrial England, "reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation and a partial penetration of those structures" (Willis 1983: 175). I focus on such 'partial penetrations' by the *Aliah* students to analyze how the logic and promises of educational reform are understood in the agentive responses of the students.

In the paper I argue[2] that the *Aliah* students' prime valuation of the their education lies in its credential worth post-reform – government recognized degrees deemed equivalent to mainstream education degrees. As future holders of these degrees, the students present themselves as "employable persons" and in doing so challenge their long drawn marginal position in the economy and society as "unemployable persons". I demonstrate how by separating "being employable" from being employed*,* the *Aliah* students are social agents innovatively responding to the broader socio-cultural and political economy, to achieve an elevated status for themselves, despite their likely unemployment and continued economic marginality. Throughout the discussion it is evident that while the change as promised in policy and popular discourse remains distant in material terms, a vernacular cultural variant of this change is intimately felt in the changing subjectivities of the students.

The paper is organized thus: In Section 2, I offer a brief context to the empirical case of my research. In Section 3, I study the process by which the *Aliah* students come to think of themselves as "employable" in the post-reform post-education landscape. The section emphasizes the primacy accorded to the post-reform certification in making the students "employable", even as they adjudge the quality and content of their education unfavorably. In section 4, I delineate the cultural politics of this "employable person". I show how *Aliah* students use their newly acquired symbolic 'capital' to seek a challenge to their marginality by signaling cultural distinction. In

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[2] The arguments made in the paper are based on 8 weeks of fieldwork conducted between July and September 2014. While the first 5 weeks were spent at *Aliah* University in the capital city of Kolkata, last 3 weeks saw extensive day travels to nearby districts to visit families and hometowns of some of the *Aliah* students, and also for visits to other madrasas. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, group discussions, casual conversations and observation with students, alumni, teachers, and family of the students. Additionally, I spoke to government officials, religious leaders, NGO activists, and journalists. Discussions were in a mix of Hindi and Bengali. All *Aliah* informants were men.

section 5, I discuss how this cultural politics holds in the face of near-certain unemployment. Section 6 concludes.

2. Case Context

Madrasas are institutions of Islamic learning. Once at the throbbing center of the socio-religious, intellectual and political life in South Asia, with time madrasas have been pushed to the side, and come to be associated with orthodoxy and regress (Robinson 2000). The current 'outmoded' form of the madrasa system is seen as locking its students in poverty traps and has generated increasing rhetoric of reform from the state and community (See Ara 2004, Asadullah et al. 2009, Sikand 2005). Identifying a positive correlation between poverty and madrasa education, the 2010 World Bank report on madrasas in South Asia emphasized the need to promote modern education and extend recognition so that madrasa graduates can pursue productive lives and fight the "curse of poverty" (WB 2010). Educational intervention is said to enhance the 'capability' of madrasa graduates to access sustainable livelihoods (see Nair 2008). Stating these aforementioned reasons[3], increasing effort is being made to forge state-madrasa partnerships to use educational reforms to advance state developmental goals, such as improved employment rates for the concerned Muslim population (see Bano 2011b).

The State of West Bengal, India is widely perceived to have one of the most successful madrasa reform programmes in South Asia, with respect to scale and scope

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[3] Even as varying political, ideological and strategic motivations have been speculated to be guiding the state's larger efforts at reform (See Sikand 2005, Bano 2011a), the stated objective has been to mainstream a marginalized population – both in the education it receives and the employment it can access (See Nair 2008).

of reform, as well as the level of its acceptance among madrasas (Bano 2011a, 2011b; Sikand 2005; Riaz 2008). It is often cited as a model for other States, including those of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The case for my research is *Aliah* University, erstwhile Calcutta Madrasah or *Madrasah-i-Aliah*, located in the capital city of Kolkata, which is often seen as a poster child for the reforms undertaken in West Bengal (Gupta 2009).

Following the recommendations of the Kidwai Commission report on Madrasa reform (2002), *Aliah* University Act of 2007 was passed (in 2008), through which Calcutta Madrasa was renamed *Aliah* University and conferred the status of an autonomous institution of higher education for graduate and postgraduate studies. The degrees granted at *Aliah* were to now be recognized by the government at both the state and national level and deemed equivalent to degrees acquired in other mainstream courses. While the establishment of the University has seen the addition of many new degrees such as in Engineering, Life Sciences, Computer Sciences, etc., my research focuses on the courses in Arabic and Theology[4], which are the main continuing courses from Calcutta Madrasa and attract students all schooled in madrasas (reformed and unreformed). These Arabic and Theology students pursue graduate and postgraduate degrees titled Bachelors and Masters in Arabic, and Kamil and Mumtazul Muhadadethin in Theology, respectively. Mainstream subjects such as English and Environmental Sciences have been introduced in the degrees, which previously only contained courses in Islamic literature and theological learning.

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[4] '*Aliah* Students' in this paper refer to *only* this category of students

The average sizes of the Arabic and Theology batches are 70 and 600 respectively (graduate and postgraduate courses combined). The students are Bengali speaking. They come mainly from nearby districts of 24 North Paragans (40), 24 South Paraganas (36), Howrah (8), Medipinur West and East (5), and Hooghly (5). Some students come from far away districts such as Malda (2), Jalpaiguri (3), Murshidabad (1)[5]. None of the students are from the city of Kolkata. All the students were previously educated at *Kharjee* madrasas and maktabs, which are unreformed, private, community-run madrasas that remain outside the ambit of state recognition or control[6].

The reported monthly household income level ranges from INR 15000 to 40,000. 22% of the students have OBC status. Students are predominantly first generation learners. Those who are second-generation learners are mainly children of madrasa-educated parents. Parental occupations include farmer (67), petty businessmen (10), teacher (11), labor (3), priestly (*imam*)(4), government 'Group D' clerk (2), and other (3)[7]. Siblings of most are mainly involved in a variety of informal jobs often undertaken simultaneously and few, if any, have any 'white collar' work.

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[5] Figures in Percentages. Source: Fieldwork.

[6] To be able to transition to *Aliah* University, all the students had also enrolled themselves at Senior Madrasas for the final four years of their school education. Senior Madrasas are reformed and recognized by the government's West Bengal Board of Madrasa Education and form a minimum requirement for *Aliah* University applicants.

[7] Figures in Percentages. Source: Fieldwork.

3. Becoming "employable": Acquiring *real* degrees for *real* jobs

"You tell me, what is a degree without recognition? Zero. It will have no weight. I will have no power to ask for employment. Negative zero."

Shafiullah[8], a final year Arabic student, echoes here a sentiment that was widely shared by the other students. Degree recognition and degree equivalence (to mainstream education) recently granted by the government was adjudged the most valuable feature of their education in yielding future benefits. It is the government's "stamp" (*chhaap)* on their degrees that makes it *real,* gives it some "weight" *(kuchh dum),* renders it of use (*kaam ki),* such that it can command some "respect" (*kuchh izzat, aukaat)* in the employment market. Recognized their education makes them "employable". Unrecognized, their education makes them "waste". Discussions with students on the assessment of their education with view of employment would naturally veer towards a discussion of the credential worth of their education without any prompt from me. That the students were made "employable" by acquiring state backed degrees was repeatedly mentioned not just in my interviews with students, but also in the interviews with teachers, government officials and community members.

As was mentioned earlier, the students have been schooled primarily in private, unrecognized *kharjee* madrasas and maktabs. The decision to discontinue in this unrecognized education system, and come to *Aliah* to acquire state recognized degrees that make them "employable" is revealing of what constitutes *real* employment for the students. In interviews with administrative elite, teachers and

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[8] All names are pseudonyms

students of *kharjee* madrasas and religious clerics it was often emphasized that no *kharjee* student goes unemployed. Purposed towards meeting community's religious needs, the students emerging out of *kharjee* madrasas are immediately appointed as imams in mosques, teachers in *kharjee* madrasas, religious speakers, etc. These are, however, not *real* jobs in the opinion of *Aliah* students, given the insecure nature and low pay, and are avowedly rejected. Moving out of the *kharjee* system to come to *Aliah* signifies this rejection.

At *Aliah,* the state recognized degrees rendered the students 'eligible' for a host of *real* job opportunities, same as available to students pursuing mainstream education, which was hitherto not possible. The oft cited examples were government jobs in the school services, civil services, military services, external affairs ministry, cultural ministry; teaching jobs in premier national universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Milia Islamia University[9]; or work in private Multi-National Companies, especially those working with the Middle East. "This degree opens many doors", said one student. Doors to jobs that are formal, white-collared, with secure and steady income flow – all in all, *real.*

3.1. Perceived quality of education

The quality of education was widely perceived as low. "All of them are bad students. I have no idea how they clear exams. Well, not *all* are bad. Some are good also. But they are exceptions – rarest of the rare. Most are bad.", said a government official. I was often asked to check for myself – "These students can't read a sentence in

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[9] Premier National Universities, in New Delhi

Arabic. Can't write a sentence in Arabic. Make them stand up and ask, why don't you?" bemoaned a teacher. It was beyond the scope of this study to objectively assess the quality standards. While I did observe high levels of absenteeism in both teachers and students, and hardly any conversations in Arabic amongst students or with teachers, a differently purposed research will be required to make a confident claim on the matter. For the purpose of my argument here, the low subjective valuation of the quality of education suffices.

Interestingly, while the poor quality was lamented, it did not seem to dampen much the enthusiasm arising from the perceived high credential worth of the *Aliah* education. Many students pointed to the low quality of education as a "problem in full India". While good quality education would be a "plus point", the students saw themselves as "sufficiently employable" even without it.

3.2. Content of Education

The subjects studied (*Dini Talim)* are valued highly for their intrinsic merit. Learning subjects like *Tafsir* (Quranic Commentary), *Hadith* (Prophetic Traditions), *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Usool* (Rulings on, and interpretation of, Islamic jurisprudence and Prophetic traditions) and *Faraid* (inheritance law) is believed to impart high moral education and guide a person on how to lead a life of meaning and value – both to him and to the society at large. Madrasa education gives a person *"real grounding"* and acts like a "compass" guiding man on every step. Students of this education, I was repeatedly told, would never cheat, lie or bribe (*sachai ki talim)*.

While madrasa education, and subsequent specialized studies in Arabic and Theology made the students "educated" – knowledgeable of their religion and how to apply it to lead a principled life – it did not make them "employable". The intrinsic and instrumental role of education (Sen 1999) was separated into the content and certification of their education. As Alam, a final year postgraduate Theology student, points out: "Religious education (*Dini Talim*) is a degree for my self, for my family, for my community and for the here-after (*Akhiriyaat)*. This degree – Mumtazul Muhaddethin (equivalent to Masters in Theology) – is a degree for my stomach, my pocket, my worldly duties (*duniya ke kaam*)".

Assessing the content of their education as one that had great intrinsic merit but was not directly employable, as the job market demanded skills in English, Computer and Mathematics which the students lacked, the students felt that it was their degree credentials, which made them 'equal' to mainstream education students, and by extension, made them equally employable. Siddiqullah, a recent *Aliah* graduate, explained, "See now, first there is what you study. And then there is what degree you have. You carry your education in your heart forever but you leave the institution with a degree on a piece of paper. When somebody sees my degree, I am just a Bachelor (*Hons*) – just like others."

4. The cultural politics of the "employable person"

The cultural production of the "employable person" is rooted firmly in the two most valued characteristics of the students' *Aliah* education: government recognition of degree and government-granted equivalence to mainstream education degrees. In this

newly acquired symbolic capital of their degrees the students seek a challenge to their continued marginality. While the first of the two characteristics is mobilized to communicate distinction from the *kharjee* students, the second is stressed to establish equivalence to the mainstream students. Both the indicated distinction and equivalence are used to establish a superior cultural identity. I evaluate each in turn.

Before proceeding further, it is important to note how the signaling of cultural distinction and superiority on the backs of a newly acquired "employable" identity is a nuanced variant of the culturally produced identity of the "educated person" as widely noted in the existing literature. Levinson *et al* (1996: 14) have been at the forefront of leading the "vision of cultural production of the educated person" to understand how persons are "formed in practice" with the ultimate aim to understand "how human agency operates under powerful structural constraints". These cultural productions, they argue, are important to understand how the social agents interact with structural processes that work to suppress and marginalize them. For example, in their study of educated youth in Nepal, Skinner and Holland (1996: 274) observe the embodiment of the "emblematic value of education as both a route to upward mobility and as a shedding of the hated oppressions of the past" by the "educated person". This "educated person" is constructed against an "uneducated person" who was "someone to be pitied and scorned". Other scholarship focused on studying processes of cultural production too has centered the subjectivities surrounding the identity of the "educated" person formed against an "uneducated" other (See Levinson *et al* 1996, Jeffrey *et al* 2008).

The case of the *Aliah* students differs on two counts. First, the axis for "cognitive transformations" (Jeffrey *et al* 2008: 17) and cultural distinctions is primarily along the lines of their employable and not educated status. The immediate point of comparison referred by the students is the *similarly* "employable" mainstream student and *dissimilarly* "unemployable" *kharjee* student. In the construction and presentation of their cultural identities, the uneducated do not feature as prominently. Secondly, the cultural distinction signaled from the "unemployable" *kharjee* student is not as sharp as is widely noted for the "educated persons" adopted distance from the uneducated. For example, Jeffrey *et al* note that the educated youth in their study indulge in "joking, horseplay and teasing" (ibid: 70) to describe the uneducated, and themselves exercise strict constraint in ever "slipping" into the "uncouth" ways of the uneducated. Conversely, while the *Aliah* students present themselves as superior to the *kharjee* students, they do not dismiss the *kharjee* students in the same disparaging manner. This could be understood by the fact that the *Aliah* students share with the *kharjee* student a common identity of being educated and importantly, an education for which we they have deep appreciation.

With this caveat behind me, I proceed to first analyze the nature of the *Aliah* students' demonstrated distinction from the *kharjee* students. Through the acquisition of government-recognized degrees, the *Aliah* students signaled a knowledge and preparedness for the world, which, in their opinion, would allow them to socially advance in life. It was widely felt that the *kharjee* students lacked this sense, and therefore stayed "side-y". Here the term "side-y" is used to point to their certain continued marginality in society. Arshad, a theology student, said: "When it comes to real things of this world the *kharjee* students are very ignorant!" This "ignorance" was

most prominently manifest in their acquisition of an education which would "get them nowhere. All their life they will have to *beg* for money, they won't *get* money". Here Arshad is alluding to the perceived inability of the *kharjee* students to be eligible for respectable salaried employment. He explained:

> "They (*kharjee* students) have education. But who believes it? They believe it and those who have given them that education. They can keep showing to each other: "See! See!". Nobody else thinks their education is meaning in anything. Where will they go with that? They can become an imam in a mosque. They cannot think of becoming anything else. Because if they will go to an employer and say "give me this job please, sir", the employer will say, "ok, show me your degree". What will the *kharjee* student say then? Thumbs down *(Thenga)*?"

When this imagined employer would instead ask him about his education qualifications, Arshad said he would proudly show his recognized degree from *Aliah* University and the employer would "understand".

Further, it was argued that the acquisition of these degrees and the subsequent cultural distinction was arising from the students' ease and ability to manage both their religious and material motivations. The *kharjee* students, in their preoccupation with religious education (*dini talim),* had completely forgotten about worldly matters *(duniya ka kaam).* Another *Aliah* student remarked, "*Din din din din* (religious education) only, no *duniya* (world)? That is not even what Islam says – that you forget world. You have to keep both in mind."

The worldly ignorance of the *kharjee* students was contrasted with the cosmopolitan awareness of the *Aliah* students, who had better prepared themselves to engage with *this* material world. The students pointed to the restrictions on the movement of the

students in *kharjee* madrasas where the environment was "too much strict". In contrast, the *Aliah* students said they read the newspaper, watched films, roamed the city, invested in electronic gadgets, used the Internet, wore jeans, etc. – activities many could not engage in while in *kharjee* madrasas. These supposed "transgressions" were used as examples to illustrate the ability of the students to successfully balance the religious core of their education and personal values with the changing material world. It was a similar balance that allowed them to acquire *real* degrees which made them "employable" for *real* jobs, opening for them a chance at no longer being a "side-y" themselves and joining the mainstream.

Their mainstreaming was more prominently discussed when the students stressed the equivalence of their degrees to the mainstream education students. The emphasized equivalence is well highlighted in the following excerpt from a discussion with a Theology student:

> "M-u-m-t-a-z-u-l M-u-h-a-d-d-a-t-h-i-n! Somebody hears this they think "Oh My Gosh! Such a heavy name!" But then we tell them this is just like your Bachelors degree. It is like you can say Bachelors in Religious Studies. Alim, Fazil, Kamil, Mumtazul Muhaddathin, these are heavy sounding names but when we explain that it is same, people understand. Same respect has been given to all. It is no different. Engineering, Life Sciences, Mathematics....Arabic and Theology. Arabic is a modern international language anyway."

The sense that it was "all same, no different" was further bolstered in the *manner* in which these *equivalent* degrees were obtained. The students took pride in the "proper" and "systematic" structural organization at *Aliah*. They would point to the semester system and common entrance examinations as examples of features of the process of degree acquisition common with many mainstream education institutions.

According to Paul Willis (1983: 112), cultural production is "the active, collective use and explorations of received symbolic, ideological, and cultural resources" by social agents to respond positively to whatever their constraints and conditions are. These "uses" and "explorations" of received resources can be seen to signal social change following two different trajectories. The first is by rejecting the mainstream the social agents believe they cannot partake in, and a subsequent cultural reformulation of their marginal positions. This is clear in the case of the 'lads' in Willis' study, aware of the structural impediments to success through education, rejected academic work and through smoking, drinking, stylish dressing, and having a 'laff', displayed contempt for the "mental and bodily inculcations of the school" (59). Similarly, Demerath (1999: 163-4) has noted the "educated persons'" return to traditional occupations and valorization of traditional identities as a critique of education. The other trajectory is of the social agents signaling a membership to the mainstream they feel linked to by virtue of sharing in a common cultural capital, even as they are aware of their inability to become more than a symbolic member. For example, Wiess (2002) has studied the Tanzanian educated unemployed youth's adoption of modern cultural styles as a strategy for partial fulfillment of their modern ambitions, in light of their continued economic marginality. Similarly, the North Indian men in Jeffrey *et al*'s (2008: 15) study signal cultural distinction by embracing, instead of rejecting, values of modern education and maintaining elevated status as 'educated' men, who perceived themselves to be culturally more 'refined' and 'civilized' in comparison to an 'illiterate' other (*unpaad, gawaar*), even when unsuccessful in procuring employment.

The case of the *Aliah* students belongs to the latter category, where, similar to the Tanzanian and North Indian educated youth, they can be seen to signal cultural distinction not by rejecting but by aligning with the mainstream – by brandishing their shared common cultural capital, even as this capital bears disproportionate benefits.

5. "Employable persons" and under/unemployment

Despite the enthusiastic celebration of the opening of a wide range of government and private white-collar jobs in the formal sector, the *Aliah* students seriously consider and pursue only few, and successfully secure even fewer, of these many employment options. While a full list of new opportunities is spelled out when displaying the value of their credentials, when discussing these jobs as actual possibilities for work, the students admit to being 'eligible' but 'incapable' of accessing them. They find themselves lacking in the social, cultural and economic resources that are needed to navigate unfamiliar, and oftentimes hostile, social networks for obtaining these jobs (see Bourdieu 1977, 1984). Working with current students and alumni from the previous 3 years, I found that not a single student had secured, or even applied to, a private white-collar job. In government jobs, the students only considered applying for the job of a teacher in government schools or other government recognized madrasas. Only 9 of the 58 alumni surveyed were successful in this. The rest of them were still waiting for work. Given this very real possibility of underemployment/ unemployment for most of the students, how can we understand the cultural production of the "employable person" and his politics?

To answer this, it is important to appreciate how the notion of becoming, and being, employable is rooted not so much in *what* employment is sought and acquired, but the *possibility* that it could be *any*. The *Kharjee* education of the *Aliah* students is seen to restrict them to the fringes of the society, by denying them even the *possibility* of participating in the putative spoils of the socio-economic development that is perceived to be underway around them. Acquisition of *real* degrees at *Aliah* affords the students these *possibilities,* symbolically to the same extent as the general education students. It is the "opening of doors" that is cherished, even if the students are constrained – in their will or ability – to pass through these metaphorical doors. Reformulating Skinner and Holand (1996) thus, the emblematic value of the *degrees* accorded is valued for the *symbolic* opening of routes of upward mobility which is crucial in *signaling* a shedding of the oppressions of the past. Thus, in the "respect" accorded to their degrees in its recognition and equivalence, the students seek a tool to contest their marginality, as they have now been *declared* part of the mainstream. The students' acquired "employable" status, as against their previous "unemployable" status, is celebrated as inaugurating this change.

The students stressed that under/unemployed did *not* mean unemployable. Ali, a final year graduate elaborates:

> "Employment is a different thing. Unemployment is a national problem. See, there are 10,000 Crore[10] people in this country and there are 10,000 jobs. How will everyone get a job? So many people are sitting at home. Are Engineers not sitting at home? And doctors? Bad if I don't get a job now, but this is a national problem."

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[10] 1 crore= 10 million

That unemployment was a *national* problem faced by *everyone* and that the *Aliah* students were *no exception* to it was a common sentiment. This should be read as an exercise in once again stressing the equivalence the government recognized degrees had bestowed on them. They had become as employable as *everyone else*, and just like everyone else they were experiencing the problem of under/ unemployment. Even in their likely failure, they sought a reaffirmation of their equivalent status as they were equally sharing this failure with many in the mainstream they had been deemed equivalent to.

However, the durability of this cultural strategy in the face of prolonged unemployment is admittedly suspect. While this time-bound research conducted just a few years since *Aliah'*s first batch of graduates cannot make precise claims, it is likely that if the students experience long-term unemployment, their identity as "employable persons" will weaken, as is noted in the case of some of the unemployed educated men in Jeffrey *et al's* (2008) study who begin to present themselves more as 'useless' and 'wandering' than culturally superior 'educated' persons.

6. <u>Conclusion</u>

I have situated this paper at the intersection of three shifting landscapes in South Asia today. First, there is a growing faith in the power of education and its use as a development tool. The madrasa reforms discussed in this paper are reflective of this trend. Second, at the very time of this increased investment in education (aspirational and otherwise), the changing macroeconomic context has been such that employment generation has been very poor, and the growth largely 'jobless'. The few jobs created

are often corned by the already privileged. Third, given this mismatch, there is a fear of missing the opportunity to draw dividends from the changing demographics in the region. At the intersection of these landscapes, I have studied the case of the *Aliah* students in West Bengal, India to anthropologically understand the madrasa youth's navigational strategies in such uncertain and rocky terrain.

I have shown that while the broader trend remains towards a reproduction of privilege, the students' agentive navigation works to recalibrate their position as reproduced in the social hierarchy. In the absence of the promised social transformation through education, such 'partial penetrations' as discussed here in production and politics of the 'employable person', are worthy of serious scholarship.

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