

A NEW FACE FOR MADRASAS

By Moin Quazi

The lodestar

The silhouette of the large mosque, brick-like but for a bulbous dome, looks blurry in the downpour past the minarets as the imposing wide red brick gates herald you into the hallowed precincts of one of the most influential Islamic institutions in Asia.

This imposingly beautiful structure is Darul Uloom, the hallowed seminary. It is the spiritual lodestar for South Asia's 500 million Muslims and is considered a "citadel of Islam" amid the westernization of the sub-continent.

Inside, room after room is filled with students wrapped in shawls against the winter chill and wearing crocheted skullcaps. They squat cross-legged on mats, reading from Qur'ans that lie open before them, resting on low wooden bookstands. Teachers supervise them, most of them respected elders with shaved upper lips and faces framed by scraggly beards, many dyed with henna. A Muslim who has memorized all 6,236 verses of the Qur'an earns the right to be called a *hafiz*.

Religious schools are a common feature of Muslim life. The most common of these schools is known as a *madrasa*. In general, *madrastas* focus on teaching the Qur'an, the recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, sacred law and other Islamic subjects.

No problem in countries in South Asia casts such a long shadow over its future as the abject failure of the government to educate more than a fraction of its people. The virtual collapse of government schooling has meant that many of the poorest people who wish to enhance their children's hope of advancing themselves have no option but to place them in the *madrasa* system, where they are guaranteed an ultra-conservative and outdated but free education, often subsidized by religious endowments provided by the Wahhabi Saudis.

Madrastas have a long and rich history. These schools were distinct from *madrastas* of the present age. In addition to teaching the Qur'an and hadith, they also taught mathematics, science, and literature. The curriculum in these *madrastas* was invariably taught in Arabic, comprised usually *tafsir* (Qur'anic interpretation), *shariah* (Islamic law), *hadith* (sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad), *mantiq* (logic) and Islamic history.

The *madrasa* system is a thousand years old. However, the first major academic institution in the Muslim world was founded by Nizam al-Mulk Abu Ali al-Hasan al-Tusi (1018-1092), the celebrated Persian scholar and vizier of the Seljuk Empire. Later, Nizam al-Mulk established numerous *madrastas* all over the empire that, in addition to providing Islamic knowledge,

imparted secular education in science, philosophy, public administration, and governance. The earliest recorded South Asian *madrasa* was established in Ajmer, India, in 1191 A.D.

The Golden Age

Madrasas have played an essential role in the history of Islamic civilization. They have been powerful nodes in the learning system and have been harbingers of several revolutionary achievements in fields as diverse as jurisprudence, philosophy, astronomy, science, religion, literature and medicine. Only when the Golden Age of Islam began to decline did the *madrasas* lose their academic and intellectual purity and ceded prime space to western-oriented education.

The spread of *madrasas* played a vital role in consolidating doctrinal positions and legal thinking, now forming the dominant part among Sunnis. In time, the Shias developed their religious seminaries, called *Hawzas*, which play a similar role. Some of the most famous *madrasas* are the Deoband in India, al-Azhar in Egypt, *Hawzas* of Qum in Iran and the Zaytunia in Tunisia.

Negative profiling

Madrasas worldwide have suffered a significant loss of reputation in recent decades on account of a wave of extremism. They have been continually targeted with an avalanche of searing and strident critiques. The state has denounced *madrasas* in secular countries and attempted to wrest exclusive control over them. Some *madrasas* are indeed guilty of fostering extremism, but most aren't.

However, the negative stereotypes presented in some sections of the media do not show an accurate picture. The majority of *madrasas* offer an opportunity, not a threat. For young village children, these schools may be their only path to literacy. For many orphans and the rural poor, *madrasas* provide essential social services: education and lodging for children who otherwise could find themselves the victims of forced labour, sex trafficking, or other abuses

Rather than undermining the *madrasa* system, policymakers should engage it because the negative stereotyping has distracted us from their vast potential to nurture children and instil the correct moral and civic values. The reality of the *madrasa* system is now far different: it is characterized by both orthodoxy and diversity. If we can modernize them through meaningful convergence of all stakeholders, they can become a productive ally for India's unmanageable educational infrastructure.

Madrasa curriculum

The eighteenth-century scholar Mulla Nizamuddin Sahalvi designed the first formal educational curriculum for mainstream Indian *madrasas*. Thus, the curriculum was named after him as "Dares-e-Nizami." *Madrasas* generally taught calculation, grammar, poetry, history, the Qur'an

and sacred law. At a higher level, they taught literary subjects and arithmetic. While memorization of texts was emphasized, personal instruction, lectures, and imitation of the teacher by students were also crucial to minimize errors in religious understanding.

When the East India Company purchased the right to collect revenue in the Mughal provinces of Bengal, Orissa and Bihar from Emperor Shah Alam, one of the clauses in the purchase agreement was that the British company would not change the legal and administrative systems in those provinces.

Obligated by the need to train judges and administrators to run those systems primarily operating under Hanafi Muslim laws, the company needed to devise a curriculum for the schools that it wanted to set up for its prospective employees. British schools also adopted this syllabus.

This syllabus was an adapted version of the original *Dars-e-Nizami* devised by Abu Ali Hasan ibn Ali Tusi, known as Nizam al-Mulk, for the higher education institution. The most notable contribution of the school is the formulation of Dars-i Nizamiyya, the standard education pattern of curriculum it pioneered in the mid-eighteenth century. The scholar who shepherded the design of the course was Maulana Nizamuddin Siharvi of Lucknow.

It is essential to underline the innovative features of the new syllabus. Islamic education was usually divided into two categories: *manqulat* or the transmitted sciences such as exegesis (tafsir), traditions (hadiths) and jurisprudence (fiqh); and *maqulat* or the rational sciences in which logic, philosophy, theology, rhetoric and mathematics were taught. Without undermining the importance of *manqulat*, which had previously dominated the curriculum, the Firang Mahal shifted the emphasis to *maqulat*. Grammar, logic and philosophy acquired more significant weightage in the teaching.

Madrasa curricula, in most cases, offer courses like "Koran-i-Hafiz" (memorization of the Qur'an), Alim (allowing students to become scholars on Islamic matters), *Tafsir* (Qur'anic interpretation), *Sharia* (Islamic law), *Hadith* (injunctions of Prophet Muhammad), *Mantic* (logic), and Islamic history (mainly constructed and invariably avoiding any discussion on weak points of old Muslim leaders).

The transformation of teaching pedagogy

From the eighteenth century, large parts of the Muslim world engaged with modernity in its colonial form, an encounter that transformed almost all aspects of Muslim societies. Modern schools, higher education institutions, new official languages, and a contemporary epistemology were introduced. *Madrasas* continued to provide religious instructions, though they underwent remarkable transformations in form, teaching, and to some extent, content.

The social composition of *madrasas* began to change, becoming less affluent and more rural, with the more inspirational Muslims joining western educational streams. The *madrasas* lost

intellectual vitality, and teaching became pedantic with little scope for creative or intellectual development.

Madrasas no longer retained the cutting-edge educational philosophy. The most significant change was the shift from imparting knowledge of *manqulat* (the branches of knowledge relating to belief and religion) and *maaqulat* (chapters relating to reason and wisdom)

The First War of Indian independence of 1856 A.D. marked a division of the composite *madrassa* education into secular and religious spaces. This division can be seen in the Deoband and Aligarh traditions, where Sir Syed Ahmed Khan emphasized the development of an educational system according to the need of the time while Deoband insisted on preserving religious values and practices in the Indian subcontinent.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who founded the Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental College in Aligarh in 1877 A.D., studied under the same teachers as the founders of Deoband. But he believed that the downfall of India's Muslims was due to their unwillingness to embrace modern ways. He decoupled religion from education and sought to emulate the culture and training of India's new colonial masters in his school. But Sir Syed's intentions were vastly different from what others perceived. The purpose of this new school was not just to prepare students for jobs. Sir Syed's key objective was that students should imbibe the new vision of knowledge-seeking, which was changing civilizations elsewhere. Sadly it took us so many years to clear the misunderstandings about Sir Syed's true mission. . The model received support from the British, although it was criticized by orthodox religious leaders who were hostile to any modern influences.

Darul Uloom Deoband was founded in 1866A.D. to preserve Muslim identity and heritage in the face of British imperialism, which had replaced the rule of the Mughals. The Deoband leaders went back to Qur'anic basics and rigorously stripped anything Hindu or European from the curriculum. Deoband's founders made it the centre for "newfound scriptural conservatism in Islam," according to Alexander Evans, a British diplomat who has researched south Asian *madrasas*

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The ideological foundations of the seminary have been distilled into a set of seven cardinal principles that define the school's charter (*maslak*).

These are (1) Conformity with Islamic law (shari'a). (2) Sufi-inspired self-purification and the search for spiritual perfection (suluk-i batin). (3) Conformity to the principles that guided the Prophet and his companions (sunna). (4) Reliance on the Hanafi law school. (5) Certitude and stability in true beliefs concerning the Hanafi theologian al-Maturidi. (6) Removal of unlawful

things (muskrat), especially the refutation of polytheism, innovations, atheism, and materialism. (7) Adherence to the principles personally embodied by the school's founders, Muhammad Qasim and Rashid Gangohi.

Nadwatul Ulama was launched in 1898 A.D. by a broad spectrum of *ulema*, traditionalists to modernists, who all believed that the Deoband-type *madrasa* education did not equip students for the challenges of modern life. Placing a greater emphasis on the liberating message of the Qur'an, Nadwa favoured certain departures from the traditional curriculum and emphasized the study of history. Nadwa's tolerance to intra-Sunni differences made it attractive.

Firang Mahal (foreigner's palace, which is located in Luck now) is closely identified with the evolution of the educational pattern of *madrasas* in the Indian sub-continent. Firang Mihalis (scholars inhabiting Firang Mahil) trace their descent to the eleventh-century scholar and mystic Abd Allah Ansari of Herat, who in turn was a descendant of Ayyub Ansari, a close companion of Prophet Muhammad. Its scion, Mullah Hafiz grew into prominence during Mughal rule. In 1559 A.D. Emperor Akbar endowed him with *madam-I-ma'ash*, or revenue-free grant. In 1692 A.D., His great-grandson, Qutb al-Din was murdered during a land dispute (1695 A.D.) and the family suffered a financial jolt. Emperor Aurangzeb gifted them the present house, named Firangi Mahal. Scholars assembled here from all parts of India and Arabia, Central Asia, and China. In 1896 A.D., Shibli Numani, the legendary Islamic scholar, referred to Firang Mahalas as "The Cambridge of India." In the late nineteenth century, a *madrasa* was formed and in 1905 A.D. a formal institution took shape under the name Madrasayi Aliya Nizamiyya, which continued until 1969 A.D.

While Deoband and its clones did not compromise on puritanism, there was a movement of educational reforms from within the realms of Islamic educationists that firmly believed that in the absence of modern education, Muslims would be unable to compete in the global employment market. These educationists were driven by social and economic concerns and believed the community should adapt to the new currents.

The critique

Critics often charge the *madrasa* system with anachronism, citing its insistence on the supreme pedagogical value of the old texts. The traditionalists argue that, apart from connecting students to the canonical tradition, the "Nizami curriculum" enhances the student's mastery of every discipline and enables scholars to solve any contemporary problem.

One of the most accomplished modern products of *madrasas*, who had a very close association with the Deoband seminary, Ebrahim Moosa, avers, "Few have been able to refute the charge that the texts used are redundant and at times impenetrable, save to a few scholars who have spent their lives mastering them. Indeed most texts are frustratingly terse, forcing teachers and students to scour commentaries and super-commentaries for help."

He further argues, "For decades, critics have petitioned for more lucid texts. But inertia has turned the texts and syllabus into inviolable monuments to the past. The result is that students are poorly prepared and lack the confidence to engage the tradition critically to meet the needs of a changing world. At its worst, the system recycles intellectual mediocrity as righteousness."

The modern Muslim reformist thinker, Fazlur Rahman, believed that the cultural isolation of *madrasa* students would lead to stagnation. Indeed, the puritan *madrasas* are already bellowing signs of more profound dissatisfaction and fatigue with a redundant learning system. Rahman contextualized and described *madrasa* learning as follows:

"With the decline in intellectual creativity and the onset of ever-deepening conservatism, the curricula of education... shrank and the intellectual and scientific disciplines were expurgated, yielding the entire space to purely religious disciplines in the narrowest sense of the word. Mechanical learning largely took the place of original thought. In the thirteenth century, the age of commentaries began. It is not rare to find an author who wrote a highly terse text in a certain field, to be memorized by students and, then to explain the enigmatic text, he authored both a commentary and a super commentary!"

Shibli Nu'mani, a renowned twentieth-century scholar from within the *madrasa* circles, noted, "For us, Muslims, mere English [modern] education is not sufficient, nor does the old Arabic *madrasa* education suffice. Our ailment requires a 'compound panacea' (*ma'jun-i murakkab*)—one portion eastern and the other western." These sentiments are valid even though the local custodians of *madrasas* don't acknowledge them. The curriculums are often fossilized, with some science and philosophy texts dating back to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries.

The way forward

There is no school in Muslim countries in which religious studies do not exist. But the teacher of religion is usually not also a teacher of secular studies. The two fields are becoming entirely independent of each other. The central problem facing all Muslims today is finding a new way of life—Islamic in character—which will be halfway between the East and the West and provide the internal stability necessary to enable Muslims to face their problems independently. The Arab World can borrow technology from the West, but it must find the answers to its deeper issues within itself. People are not drifting away from religion. It is a fact also that the world struggle between democracy and communism has led Muslims to make a new evaluation of their faith to see where it stands regarding these two conflicting movements.

The issue of reforms of *madrasas* is, however, quite complex. The adoption of state-led modernization has a complex interplay of several factors such as trust, financial incentives, the impact of state-led policies on the functioning of *madrasas* and its implications on the community resources, which the *madrasas* are now accessing for their finances, need to examine.

Islam is not a monolith and madrasas owe allegiance to diverse schools of thought, hybridizing into further new strains. The government's understanding and strategy for dealing with *madrasas* need to evolve and transform from a black-and-white perception to a more wholesome one.

The policymakers need to be more sensitive to the sentiments of Islamic clerics and attempts must be made against reducing the discussion to "Secular versus Non-secular" and "Pro-Hindu versus Anti-Muslim" debates. The deep reservations of *madrasa* managers about the government are all not ill-founded and several of the duplicitous actions and policies of the state give enough ground for a creeping scepticism.

Efforts to stay "politically correct" have muddied the debate and discussion on how best to make modern education accessible to millions of poor Muslim youths to join the mainstream. The government understands that a proper strategy for dealing with *madrasas* needs to evolve from a black-and-white perception to a more wholesome one.

Madrasas are multi-layered institutions with depth and diversity that requires a much-nuanced understanding on the part of policy wonks. The government machinery needs to be appropriately sensitized to the sentiments of *madrasa* custodians and should refrain from reducing the whole issue to "Secular versus Non-secular" and "Pro-Hindu versus Pro-Muslim" debates. *Madrasas* are, however, not immune to change. Many of them are trying to forge a Muslim identity that is compatible with modern culture and resistant to the blandishments of radicalization.

What we should attempt is to make new *madrasas*, as well as universities, be patterned on ancient Samarkand or Bokhara rather than stressing only *madrasa* modernization. Let us take *madrasas* centuries back in history to their glorious traditions of the Islamic Golden Age. That may be more successful in winning the hearts and minds of the custodians of *madrasas*.

The quality of teaching provided to the children often equals that of the most brilliant private schools, yet the kids who enrol are from the poorest and most deprived families. However, all children have to pay modest fees. There are, however, several hybrid madrasas whose adjustable fee structure gives the poorest children access to an education, uniforms and school books at heavily subsidized rates – up to 95 per cent of fees – putting a top-quality education within reach of the poor.

Indeed the very idea of a university in the modern sense – a place where students congregate to study a variety of subjects under eminent scholars, is generally regarded as an innovation first developed at al-Azhar. Since the students are schooled in classical and modern science as well as secular and religious thought, they are better able to spot scriptural distortions. They also tend to be more connected to their communities and mainstream society, and their stable

sense of identity, religious and otherwise, shields them against radicalism. These *madrastas* are allies in India's transition to modernity.

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He began his early career as a development journalist. While still at college, he began writing on issues relating to the plight of child labourers and leading efforts against it. His work ultimately received the attention of Indian courts, leading to a series of reforms for child labourers.

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