

UNDERSTANDING THE AGENDA OF REFORMATION IN MADRASA'S

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Abstract

Madrasa education, rooted in centuries-old traditions, faces increasing scrutiny and calls for reform in the modern context. This paper examines the complexities surrounding Madrasa education and proposes a framework for reform. Drawing upon extensive literature review and empirical analysis, the paper explores the challenges and opportunities for modernizing Madrasas to better prepare students for the contemporary world. The proposed framework advocates for curriculum modernization, pedagogical innovation, and integration with mainstream educational systems. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of fostering critical thinking skills, religious literacy, and social cohesion within Madrasa settings. By synthesizing insights from various disciplines, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions on the role and future of Madrasa education in the modern era.

Keyword: Madrasa, Social Reforms, Modernization, Islamic Education, Religious Education, Globalizatio

1. INTRODUCTION

Reforming the Madrasa is a major cause for concern today. It is pertinent to keep in mind the role that the 'ulema and many, although not all, Muslims actually envisage for the Madrasas. Arguments for Madrasa reform often miss the point that, as many Muslims see it, the Madrasa is not meant to be an institution for the general education of Muslims, training them for the job market. Rather, the Madrasa is regarded as a specialized institution providing Muslims with specifically 'religious' education and transmitting the Islamic scholarly tradition. This being the case, the functioning of the Madrasas must be judged, the 'ulema argue, in terms of

the goals that the 'ulema set before them. As the former head of the Deoband Madrasa, the late Qari Muhammad Tayyeb, insisted:

When people criticize the Madrasa syllabus, they forget that the aim of the Madrasa is different from that of a modern school. The only way to pass judgment on the Madrasas is to see how far they have been able to achieve their own aims, such as inculcating piety, promoting religious knowledge, control over the base self (tahzib-i-nafs) and service of others. Therefore, no suggestion for reform of the syllabus that goes against these aims is acceptable.

Critics of the Madrasas tend to see them in stereotypical terms, often branding all Madrasas as backward and reactionary. A retired Muslim officer of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) sums up the modernist critique of the Madrasas and their 'Ulama somewhat crudely and tendentiously thus:

The authorities of the Indian Madrasas are completely oblivious of the repeated directions in the holy Qur'an regarding the need to acquire competence in study and reflection over (sic) scientific phenomenon. Madrasas have been promoting indifference towards modern and western education, so graduates of Madrasas find themselves unfit to breathe in the free air of the present age of science and technology. They would generally be suffering from inferiority complex (sic), hating everybody with modern education and themselves being hated by everybody with modern education. Islam cannot be defended by these 'misfits' who know nothing of modern knowledge.

As for the argument that Madrasas are conservative, this is to state the obvious. For, as the Madrasas

generally see themselves, they are the guardians of Islamic 'orthodoxy' and they regard their principal rule to be the conservation of Islamic 'orthodox' tradition which, although diversely understood, historically constructed and in a constant process of elaboration, is seen by the 'ulema as unchanging and fixed'. Not surprisingly, therefore, many 'ulema regard the exiting Madrasa system to be in no need of any major reform. They argue that since in the past the Madrasa's produced great Islamic scholars there is no need for nay change today.

As Maulana Sa'eed Ahmad Palanpuri, Professor of hadith at Deoband, argues:

It appears that, the products of the Madrasa's today do not come up to the standards expected of them. The cause of this is not the Madrasa syllabus, but rather, the lack of adequate experts in various disciplines, the carelessness of the students and their unwillingness to work hard.

The argument that Madrasa's do not need any major reform is articulated by several 'ulema in a fiercely defensive mood and the intentions of advocates of reform are often dismissed as suspect and dubious. Thus, the principal of a Deobandi Madrasa in Mewat, Haryana, insists:

There is no need to change our syllabus at all. This demand, even of it is articulated by those who call themselves Muslims, is actually a plot hatched by the enemies of Islam. They know that Madrasa's are the backbone of the Islamic identity, and using sweet words like 'reform' they want to destroy the Madrasa's and, thereby, destroy the Muslims as well and cause them to be absorbed into the Hindu fold. If the Madrasa's are not producing pious, god-fearing and socially engaged 'ulema today the fault lies not in their syllabus but in lowering standards of piety and dedication, increasing materialism and our straying from the path of our pious elders. Let universities reform themselves, and that can only happen when they begin to teach religion to their students. Let those who pretend to be so concerned about reforming the Madrasa's turn their attention to universities instead. After all, universities are in much more need of reform. Universities are plagued with such

problems as free sex, lawlessness, and crime, not the Madrasa's.

While such voices undoubtedly reflect the stance of many Madrasa teachers, it would be wrong to claim that they represent all shades of opinion among the contemporary Indian 'Ulama. As we shall see, several 'Ulama are themselves ardent advocates of reform, which they articulate in different forms and for different reasons.

2. TRADITIONALIST 'ULAMA AND THE CHALLENGE OF REFORM:

Debates on Madrasa reform reflect different understandings of appropriate Islamic education and, indeed, of Islam itself. As many traditionalist 'Ulama see it, since the 'pious elders'(buzurgs) have evolved a perfect system of education, and since they regard Islam as the ultimate truth, there is no need to learn anything from others. To try and do so is sometimes regarded as a sign of weak faith and as straying from the path that the 'elders' of the past have trodden. Change in the Madrasa system is, therefore, often considered to be threat to the identity and intensity of the faith. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, it is recognized as threatening to undermine the power of the 'Ulama as leaders of the community and their claims to speak authoritatively for Islam. Traditionalist 'Ulama often see proposals for Madrasa reform as interference in, or even invasion of, what they regard as their own territory. Since their claims to authority as spokesmen of Islam are based on their mastery of certain disciplines and texts, quite naturally any change in the syllabus, such as the introduction of new subjects or new books or the exclusion of existing ones, directly undermines their own claims. Besides they fear that the introduction of modern disciplines in the curriculum might lead to a gradual secularization of the institution, tempting their students away from the path of religion and enticing them towards the snares of the world. This argument is repeatedly stressed in the writings of many 'Ulama. Take, for instance, the statement of Ashraf 'Ali Thanwi, a leading Deobandi 'Alim of the early twentieth century:

It is in fact, a source of great pride for the religious Madrasa's not to impart any secular (duniyavi) education at all. Some people say that Madrasa's should teach their

students additional subjects that would help them earn a livelihood, but this is not the aim of the Madrasa at all. The Madrasa is actually meant for those who have gone mad with their concern for the hereafter (jinko fikr-l akhiraat ne divana kar diya hai).

Other traditionalist 'Ulama may not go to such lengths to deny the need for the inclusion of modern subjects in the curriculum. However, while accepting the need for reform, they would argue that this should be strictly limited and must not threaten or dilute the 'religious' character of the Madrasa's. Madrasa's, they assert, are geared to the training of religious specialists, and so it is important that 'worldly' subjects must not take the upper hand over religious instruction. Rather, it is enough, they stress, if students are able to read and speak elementary English, solve simple mathematical problems and are familiar with basic social sciences, etc. To that extent, they welcome efforts for reform, and admit that Madrasa students do need to gain a basic knowledge of these subjects so that they can function in the modern world. But they also insist that if 'excessive' stress were given to modern subjects in the Madrasa's the workload for the students would be simply too much to bear, because of which they would turn out to be 'of little use either for the faith or for the World'.

Faced with increasingly vocal demands that Deoband reform its syllabus, in October 1994 the Madrasa organized a convention attended by a large number of teachers of Deobandi Madrasa's from all over India. The convention was ostensibly held to discuss the question of reform of the syllabus of the Madrasa's, but the inaugural lecture delivered by the rector of the Deoband Madrasa, Maulana Marghub ur-Rahman, was a clear indication of how far the organizers were actually willing to go in allowing change. The Maulana insisted that there was no need at all to introduce modern education in the Madrasa's. There were thousands of schools in the country, he said, and Muslim children who want to study modern subjects could enroll there instead. Introducing modern subjects would, he claimed, 'destroy their (religious) character'. He argued that Islam had 'clearly divided' knowledge into two distinct categories of 'religious' and worldly'. The paths a destination of these two branches of knowledge, he insisted, were totally different' indeed mutually opposed. If one seeks to travel on both paths together' combining; religious and

worldly knowledge, one would get stuck in the middle', he declared. Hence, he argued, Madrasa's must remain purely religious, as the Deobandi elders had themselves all along insisted.

The convention concluded and passed a resolution declaring that because Islam was a 'complete and perfect way of life' (mukammil din), it provided solutions to all problems. Hence, it went on, in order to meet the challenges of modern life Muslims needed to rely 'only on the Qur'an, Hadith and Fiqh, and there was no need for them to take the help of 'Western knowledge and culture'. The only change in the Madrasa syllabus that the convention agreed upon was cosmetic, i.e., to include new books in some subjects and to reduce the number of texts for others. As one critic, himself a graduate of the DEOBAND MADRASA, caustically remarked.

Despite the reluctance of the managers of Deoband to allow any significant reform in the Madrasa system, the winds of change are being felt today even in the hallowed portals of the Dar ul-ulum. The growing pressure for change at the Dar ul 'ulum owe, in part, after completing their studies at the Madrasa, have gone on to regular universities for higher education or have taken up a range of occupations in India and abroad, but continue to maintain a link with their alma mater. Aware of the rapidly changing world around them, from which Madrasa students are sought to be carefully insulated, they help transmit new ideas which, in turn, have given birth to new initiatives at Deoband itself. An important role in this regard is played by the Tanzim Abna ul-Qadim, the old boys' association of the Deoband Madrasa, with its headquarters in Delhi. It has an ambitious list of aims and objectives:

- 1) To set up study centers and libraries to promote awareness about national and international affairs.
- 2) To promote the study of the Qur'an and Hadith, the movement of Shah Waliullah as well as of non-Islamic movements and to publish literature on these.
- 3) To publish articles in newspapers and journals on religious issues and on social reform.
- 4) To promote religious as well as modern education.

- 5) To establish Shariah committees in Muslim localities, consisting of 'Ulama and Imams of Masjids to solve disputes in accordance with the shariah.
- 6) To promote social reform in accordance with the shariah, such as discouraging wasteful expense on celebrations, dowry, un-Islamic practices and unwarranted divorce.
- 7) To encourage Muslims to launch social work projects to help the poor.
- 8) To work along with people of other religious and castes for common social aims and for general relief and development of all, irrespective of religion and caste.
- 9) To promote interaction and good relations between people of different religions.
- 10) To resolve misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims among non-Muslims.

The Association publishes a monthly magazine in Urdu. The Tarjuman-I Dar ul-'Ulum, which is widely read by graduates, students and teachers of the Deoband Madrasa as well as Madrasa's affiliated to the Deobandi thought. The magazine serves as an important vehicle for the transmission of new ideas, including issues related to Madrasa reform. In contrast to many 'Ulama at Deoband itself, it insists on the need for reform in the Madrasa system if Madrasa's are to play a constructive role in society. It advocates a controlled modernization, seeing this as a return to, rather than a departure from, 'authentic' Islam and the vision of the founders of Deoband. It appeals to Muslims to return to the 'authentic' Islamic tradition serves, in fact, to facilitate change and reform, rather than to oppose it wholly. Thus, for instance, in an article published in the magazine, Maulana Zain ul-Sajid bin Qasmi, a Deobandi graduate and now a teacher of Islamic studies at the Aligarh Muslim University, writes that Madrasas can no longer ignore 'modern' challenges. 'We need 'Ulama who are familiar with both religious as well as modern knowledge to serve the community and reply to the attacks on Islam from the West in the west's own language.

While this proposal obviously suggests a defensive posture vis-à-vis the challenge of the West, it also signals recognition of the importance of modern knowledge and might even represent an Islamic appropriation of modernity itself. In a similar vein, another contributor to the journal, the Deobandi

graduate maulana 'Abdur Rahim A'abid' writes that many younger Ulema today rightly feel that Madrasa need to broaden their curriculum to include basic education in subjects such as mathematics, science, social science, Hindi and English. it is not necessary, he stresses, that students at Madrasas be given detailed instruction in these modern subjects, but they should be familiarized with them on at least an elementary level. He recognizes that this might be taken by some as betrayal of the Deoband tradition, but assures his readers that in actual fact, it is not so. He reveals that the founder of the Madrasaa, maulana Qasim Nanotawi, arranged for Sanskrit to be taught at Deoband in its initial years, and that another leading reformist a'lim, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi, had, likewise, suggested the need to include Hindi as well as basic modern law in the Madrasa curriculum.

In other words, he writes, the Deobandi elders felt that the Madrasa syllabus should be dynamic in order to equip would-be 'ulema with knowledge of the changing conditions of the world around them so that they could provide answers to modern questions and challenges.

Waris Mazhari is the editor of tatrjuman-i Dar-ul ulum. A graduate of Deoband Madrasa, he later studied at the Nadwat-ul Ulama, Lucknow and then at the Jamia Millie Islamia, New Delhi. Besides editing the journal, he is involved in a number of projects promoting Islamic as well as modern education among Muslims, including Madrasa's graduates. His small office is located in an alley in the Muslim ghetto of Jogabai in south Delhi, and is a measure hub of activity. He advocates a thorough revision of the syllabus followed at Deoband, particularly for such core subjects as theology and jurisprudence. The books of theology still taught at Deoband are largely based on ancient Greek philosophy, having been written at a time when Greek philosophy posed a major challenge to Islam. They were also intended to combat various other rival schools and sects, such as the kharijites and the Ismail's, and so they deal at great length with their doctrines in order to refute them. Today however, he stresses, the challenge from Greek philosophy and the rival sects no longer exists, and so the traditional books of theology do not have relevance any longer. 'what Madrasa's need today', instead, he passionately argues, 'are books of theology that also take into account the confirmed findings of modern science, and that seek to engage with contemporary

ideological changes, such as materialism, atheism, Marxism, Hindutva, and so on.'

For this purpose, Mazhari suggests the introduction of new commentaries on the Qur'an he concedes that the medieval Qur'anic commentators, whose books are still used in the Madrasa's, did great service in the cause of the faith. That does not mean, however, that this should be idolized or their work considered sacrosanct.

3. CONCLUSION

Muslim scholars calling for the modernization of Madrasa's today share with their opponents a commitment to the Islamic tradition and present their schemes for modernized Madrasa's as a return to the 'authentic' tradition as represented by the Prophet and his companions, rather than as constituting a radical departure from it. The very notion of the 'authentic' Islamic tradition, being a social construct and an ongoing, constantly evolving project, is itself fiercely contested. Thus, different versions of what constitutes 'authentic' Islamic tradition are put forward and debated while appealing for Madrasa's reform. Advocates for the introduction of modern subjects in the Madrasa curriculum are also aware of the limits of reform, and there is considerable debate about how far reform should go. This tension centers on the perceived role and function of the Madrasa's. Those who see the Madrasa's as geared to the training of religious professionals argue that modern subjects should be allowed only in so far as they might help their students understand and interpret Islam in the light of modern knowledge.

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