

Reinterpreting Madrasas

Islamic Education, Diversity and National Identity: Dîni Madrasas in India Post 9/11

*edited by Jan Peter Hartung,
Helmut Reifeld;
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ARJUMAND ARA

The book under review is the outcome of a conference held at Neemrana Fort, Rajasthan, during November 30-December 2, 2003 by the Konrad Adaneur Foundation, Germany, as part of its special programme "Dialogue with Islam". The objective of this programme, started in the backdrop of the tragic events of 9/11, has been to reinforce the dialogue with all willing forces in the Muslim world, first, in order "to provide elucidation of the innumerable varieties of Islam to a wider western audience, in order to counteract the dangers of confusing Islam to its militant variety only", and secondly, to prevent the "potential and actual conflicts between Muslims and the west, a scenario repeatedly predicted by Samuel Huntington since 1993".

As part of this programme the present conference on Islamic education or dîni madrasas was held because the organisers thought that "too much of the contemporary international attention on madrasa education is fixed on its alleged fundamentalist impact." In the aftermath of 9/11 and subsequent declaration of war on Islamic terrorism, the US and other western

countries accused the madrasas of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in particular, as breeding ground for terrorist activities. As it is evident from media reports, the focus on madrasa system of education was very intense (branding it as dubious and dangerous) and Indian society could not remain unaffected by it. As the editors put it: "In parts of the Indian society, the new context of international debate gave rise to older anti-Islamic sentiments, which tried to include the Indian madrasas into the stream of international impeachment." However, the criticism of Indian madrasas by the "Hindu nationalists" and mass media as well, has been devoid of factual information regarding the diversity and activities of Muslim alternative system of education in India. By publishing this book the editors have tried to fill in the gap, and this may be called a sincere attempt to understand madrasa education in India, in the context of history and in the present context as well.

In the introductory part of the book, the editors tell us that "almost half the participants (of the seminar) belonged to the higher echelons of Indian Dini Madaris, or were at least to some extent, affiliated with these Muslim religious educational institutions", but they have failed to include in this volume their papers. However, this fact does not undermine the academic credentials of the scholars included in this book, as most of the scholars are experts on the subject or/and have been associated with prestigious centres and departments of Islamic studies, religion or history at various universities.

The articles included in this book touch several important questions and controversies regarding madrasas. The major questions they identify are concerned with the link between madrasas and violence, anti-national activities and terrorism, transparency in the matters of funding, spread and patronage of madrasas and political implications of their education system.

While these questions are addressed at various levels in different articles, the editors tell us that during the discussions it was commonly accepted that the madrasa education in India has certain deficiencies. These deficiencies are identified here. Madrasas follow a limited curriculum, they lack emphasis on education in modern sciences and modern languages as well as any understanding of different cultures. In many cases, they do not seem to do justice to the ideal of equal education for women. They often appear as closed against any influences from the outside, more interested in “the other within” rather than integration into the outside world.

However, had the contributors kept the objectives of madrasa education in mind, they would not have committed the mistake of comparing madrasas with the institutions of modern education. Most of the writers have erred by having a modernist view of them (this point has been taken in well by Yoginder Sikand in his article on ‘The Indian Madâris and the Agenda of Reform’). And hence, the tools they applied to measure the efficiency of madrasa education, by corollary, are modern. No one would dispute that irrespective of the role of madrasas in the past as “nurseries of civil services”, the objective of madarsa education today has been restricted to impart Islamic education only – be it on an elementary level or a specialised studies of highest order. Despite the complex system the madrasa education has developed into, the fundamental objective remains the same – to learn all aspects of religion from every possible angle. Hence the questions of limitation of curriculum, modernity, knowledge of languages, cultures and sciences raised by the editors become quite irrelevant in this context. Therefore, the study of this topic could have been made more useful by focusing on producing analytical and empirical studies of various set-ups of madrasa education in India in the light of allegations made against them in the aftermath of 9/11 and war on so-called Islamic terrorism.

It has to be kept in mind that reform through education of sciences and/or information technology can never be instrumental in bringing about any real change, even from a modernist point of view. For example, the use of computer or internet technology cannot change a person’s outlook. Technology is just a tool that can be used in pursuing one’s objectives. This also needs emphasis that understanding Islam by an academic yardstick is not the task of a madrasa scholar or student. For this purpose, there are innumerable research centres, institutions and departments in universities spread all over the world that are undertaking studies on different aspects of Islam as a subject in view of its socio-political importance. Madrasas have primarily theological context and they should be studied in that context only.

However, this does not lessen the importance of the other aspects of the subject discussed in this book, particularly in view of the scarcity of useful material on this topic. The topics covered in this volume range from history of madrasas to case studies of various madrasas. In the modern context, articles on reform, introduction of natural sciences in madrasa education and Muslim reactions to the post-9/11 media discourse have also been included. The book has been divided into four parts, three of which deal with historical perspectives, regional perspectives and current development. The fourth part ‘A View from Within’ comprises an article by Syed Abul Hashim Rizvi on ‘Introduction of Natural Sciences in Madrasa Education in India’ in which he advocates inclusion of modern natural sciences in the syllabi of madrasas. This issue is controversial among ulama because many of them see contradiction between modern western and Islamic approach towards natural sciences.

Comprehensive Study

The four essays included in the first part comprise a comprehensive critical study of evolution of madrasa education in the Mughal period and their subsequent alienation from other educational systems developed during colonial period, which led to the confrontation with “reformist educational movements” as well. Dealing with this broad theme, Sayyid Naqi Husain Jafri’s ‘A Modernist View of Madrasa Education in Late Mughal India’ sees the decline of madrasas of India (he terms them

as torch-bearers of knowledge – revealed and secular) in the fact that the “Orient” remained ignorant of the Renaissance and the advancement of knowledge in Europe for a long time. Madrasas too were no exception and hence they also lagged behind in intellectual pursuits. Secondly, Jafri concludes, “a parallel and powerful move to shun intellectual pursuits and revert to traditional sciences brought further deterioration”. But he does not go into the reasons as to why madrasas shun western knowledge. He should have thrown some light on the role of madarsas that turned into political movements, vehemently opposed to the colonial rule and their system of education, which they considered harmful for the eastern value system. This made them cling to traditional sciences and philosophy.

Farhat Husain and Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri’s articles deal with the conflict madrasa education faced during colonial period, and inner Islamic contradictions that arose out of reformist movements. In Farhat Husain’s view, madrasas developed the diversity of perspectives while

confronting with the challenges of modernity in colonial India. They developed highly heterogeneous sets of responses over issues of religious reform, inter-community relations and modern education. Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri contextualised his views by giving an exclusive study of Khanqah, a sufi-hospice-cum-madarasa at Salon in UP which was challenged by the colonial administration and by the ahl-e Hadith and Deobandis. The last chapter of this part, written by Najmul Raza Rizvi, gives an insight into the Shia educational system, particularly in the north Indian principality of Awadh. His article is appended with the current syllabi of the Madrasa-yi Nâzimiyya and Sultân al madâris of Lucknow, which actually helps the reader to understand the complexity and variety of madrasa education system.

The second part, ‘Regional Perspectives’, somehow gives an impression that it would allow a thorough insight into various kinds of madrasas set up in different regions of India so that a comprehensive picture of Islamic education would

emerge. However, a reader, to some extent, is disappointed to see only four articles, out of which two are on madrasa education in Bihar, another is a case study of a Tamil town, and one article is on Nadwat al-‘ulamâ of Lucknow. This does not give a complete picture of madrasa education on regional basis. Deoband is introduced in an article about a madrasa of Gaya in Bihar and in Yoginder Sikand’s article. However, these do not seem to give enough attention to this important institution. Deoband has not only been of central importance in religious instructions, but historically also it had evolved into a movement with political views daring to stand against the Raj. Later on it became a role model for other madrasa establishments and most of the madrasas today follow its education system. Hence, one may not see any reason for an absence of a comprehensive study of Deoband. Similarly, no information is provided about the madrasa education in Bengal, Assam (other north-eastern states as well) where the Muslims opt for madrasa education in quite a large

number and where various madrasas have been working for years.

Regional Perspectives

Despite insufficient number of articles on regional madrasas, the articles included in this part remain important, for they are thought-provoking, provide useful information and insight into the working of the concerned madrasas. And thus the insufficiency of articles on various regions is compensated to some extent. For example, Jan-Peter Hartung studies in his article *Nadwat al-'ulamâ* of Lucknow, a leading representative of Sunni Muslim religious education in India, as a linkage of Muslim scholarship with the scholarship of Arab world. Citing the examples of raids on Nadwâ in 1994 and 1998 by the then Uttar Pradesh governments, he points out how the establishment took an alibi, because of this institution's links with Arab tradition of scholarship, of accusing madrasas of militant activities directed against the secular state and the Hindu majority. Refuting allegations, misunderstanding and ignorance about madrasas, Hartung concludes:

It needs to be acknowledged that Muslim scholarship – as an integral part of the community of believers in Islam – is essentially transnational. Thus, it will maintain its relationships, especially with what is perceived as the centre of the Muslim world...It has to be emphatically stressed that this has always been the case and is not a modern phenomenon designed solely to foster anti-state activities as part of a global jihâd.

The three articles of the third part 'Current Developments' are on different topics, all of which are important. Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffery have undertaken a study on Muslim women's education in Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh. The research is based on surveys of schools and madrasas of Bijnor town and its rural hinterland, interviews of male/female schoolteachers (mawlawîs, ustânis), managers, government officials, and local politicians. The study focuses on the state of girls' education and community's responses where girls are put on a civilising mission. It is an important contribution because we rarely come across any article on this topic.

Mareike Jule Winkleman studied Muslim reaction to the post-9/11 situation where madrasas were labelled as "breeding ground for the 'angry young man'

readily available for participating in and initiating anti-national and terrorist activities". The study relies only on some English magazines and newspapers, and thus it limits the prospects of its being a correct depiction. To counter the negative projection of Islamic education, the writer gives detailed introduction of several "different" madrasas that impart modern education or have a structure of non-religious educational set-up.

Reform of Madrasas

Yogender Sikand's contribution in this part is important because it is the only article that has questioned the very concept of reform and has tried to examine the various ways in which the reform of madrasas has been conceptualised by different sections of society, including ulama and liberal Muslims. In this regard he cites the case of Deoband where, under the pressure of growing demand for change, ulama were forced to organise a convention. However the outcome of the convention was that they decided against any change in their curriculum. But it is true that there are many sections, which are pro-change, albeit for different reasons.

For example, he points out that today many of them talk about acquiring "modern" knowledge "to serve the community and counter the attacks on Islam from the west in the west's own language". This obviously indicates towards a defensive posture against western challenges.

Considering the limitations of the organisers and editors about the topic, we could not expect the book to be more inclusive. Jan-Peter Hartung's scholarly introduction to the book binds these diverse articles into a complete unit and his empathetic approach in comparing and analysing the Islamic education in various countries, leaves a positive imprint on the heart of the reader. In the end, it may be said that the book though does not cover many topics that could have been covered, yet the work remains important for several reasons. First, it is a sincere attempt to understand the history, working and objectives of madrasas in India. Second, it helps in refuting the negative image media and the west have given to madrasas. Finally, the studies included in the book are interesting and informative, and hence worth reading. **FW**

Email: arjumandara@hotmail.com