

Madrassa Reforms in Pakistan: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Madrassa is an old and customary idea of teaching. This article addresses diverse changes which occurred after the formation of Pakistan. It will likewise manage the historical assessment of madarssas. In the absolute starting there were a little number of Madrassas existed in those areas which constituted Pakistan however over recent decades, particularly after Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, it picked up prominence and became fundamental feeder to the Afghan Jihad against Soviet control. In the first instance an ordinance called the Pakistani Madrassas Education Ordinance was promulgated on August 18, 2001. Its aim was to secure the registration, regulation, standardization and uniformity of curricula and standard of education of Madrassa imparting specialised Islamic education in Pakistan with the general education system. There were different reforms and ordinances introduced time by time for the betterment of madarssas system.

Key Words: *assessment, fundamental, standardization, sectarianism, religious*

Introduction

Madrassa, plural Madrassas, is the Arabic word. In literal terms it means a place for education; school either secular or religious.¹ It is an age-old institution, which over time came to be recognised as a place for Islamic religious education. At the time of independence very few prominent Madrassas existed in territories constituting Pakistan but over past few decades, especially after Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, this institution gained prominence for the fact that it became main feeder to the mainly US-Saudi Arabia and other Western and regional powers sponsored Afghan Jihad against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Approximately 1000 madrassas were established for the purpose with aid from Middle Eastern countries. Many of these Jihadis came from madrasas. Therefore, mushrooming of madrasas was witnessed in Pakistan during 1980s.

After abrupt withdrawal of USA sponsored international help and support in 1989/90, Pakistan was left alone. It had to confront the severe fallout consequent to Afghan infighting. In that security vacuum the phenomenon of Taliban was evolved. Taliban, the students of these madrassas, took control of major part of Afghanistan. In Post 9/11, the madrasas became the target of US led, supported by 42 countries, coalition operation duly authorised by UN. Pakistan decided to support this operation, which was named Enduring Freedom (OEF). In a rebound phenomenon to this, Pakistan started facing terrorist attacks by the Taliban. This time again the madrasas came into focus, but a negative one: the Washington Post articles since 9/11 have portrayed the Pakistani madrassas in derogatory manner and addressed them with severe criticism. At the time of independence in 1947, Pakistan inherited just 200 madrassas, which have grown now close to approximately 40000. Majority of them are like nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) feeding and teaching the orphan and poor children.

Few of the madrassas fuel sectarianism, and proxy war of external and internal hardliner Sunni and Shia factions. A meager percentage of these are reportedly involved in feeding the fighters and suicide bombers to the terrorists fighting the state of Pakistan. There have been reports of some of the Madrassas of Tribal Areas of Pakistan sending fighters for Afghan Taliban (Daniel S Markey, 2014). As per P.W Singer (2001), approximately 10-15% of the Madrassas are involved in feeding the militancy. Madrassa education provides their finances, and their sway in the society has been a subject of appraisal inland and abroad. Demands to harness these and bring them under strict governmental control and reform their education system have come regularly from scholars, academicians, Law Enforcement Agencies, the policy makers and even from the Ulema (religious scholars) themselves. The issue of their reforms assumed greater significance post 9/11.

With this in the backdrop this essay is aimed at tracing back the history of Madrassa as an institution, the role these played in pre and post independent Pakistan, especially after 1979 Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. The perceptions that haunt this institution today and realities of its functioning will also be discussed. More importantly why was the need felt

to reform these? The steps and legislation done for the purpose, impact of the governmental efforts made and the way forward will also be focused at in this essay.

Literature Review

Post 9/11, international focus on countering extremism and terrorism has generated a new debate about the role of madrassas. One can find a variety of literature on the subject in the form of books, journals and newspaper articles. Jamal Malik has done the first comprehensive and in-depth study on the subject. He concludes that the Ulema (religious teachers) of different schools lack a unanimous approach on the syllabus, role and financing of Madrassas. These differences are deeply rooted in society because students and the teachers of madrassas represent different segments of society”.² He also highlights that some madrassas have left their actual role of imparting religious education and have engaged in preaching extremist views projecting their school of thought, which then fuels sectarian militancy. Tariq Rehman relates the rising militancy to Afghan Jihad that was conducted post Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. He not only identifies that the curriculum is too old but also highlights the role of madrassas in promoting sectarianism by refuting each other’s beliefs.³

Mohammad Qasim Zaman in his book discusses the reform plans and their failures also. He argues that opposition to the government agenda of reforms exists to varying degrees among the Ulema. His study contains dissenting views regarding the issue and the motives behind them.⁴ A leading book on the subject in India by Yoginder Sikand is an invaluable contribution and perhaps unrivalled among the contemporary works. He has discussed Madrassa reforms in historical perspective. This study has valuable information regarding different aspects of reforms. It also carries the detail of reformed madrassas in India that can serve as guidance for madrassas in the entire region.⁵ Another article which is highly informative about the role of madrassas in the socio-political life of Pakistan is written by Christopher Candland. The author believes that a section of the Ulema also favours reforms in order to adjust themselves to modern needs. He advises that the religious and social services of the madrassas should be recognized by the government and they may be assigned appropriate role to ensure peace in the society.⁶ Other contributions by the same author on the same topic can be found in Robert M. Hathaway’s recent anthology. They contain details of recent government initiatives of reforming Islamic education. These writings make valuable suggestions for policy makers in this regard.⁷ Maqsood Ahmad Shaheen, Dr. Farish Ullah Yousafzai and Amna Yousaf have conducted an analysis of Religious Madrassas in Pakistan being on 231 articles published in Washington Post since 9/11. As per them, most of these madrassas have been portrayed in a negative tone. Malik Mohammad Tariq in ‘The Rise And Impact of Islamic Fundamentalism In Pakistan After the Soviet Invasion In Afghanistan With Special Reference to KPK and Balochistan’ has conducted a detailed research on the Madrassas including their history specially after Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and role that was played by them and possibility of their linkages to terrorism and extremism in Pakistan.

Madrassas - A Historical View

As was the practice since the days of Prophet (PBUH), mosques served as the centers of Muslim education for almost three centuries. It was during the Abbasid period (750 - 1258 AD) that the need for a more organized educational system was felt because of the rapid expansion of knowledge and to meet the administrative needs of the empire. This gave birth to the Madrassa as a separate institution. It is believed that the first Madrassa in the Muslim world was established in the ninth century in the city of Fas (Fez) in Morocco.⁸ The syllabi of earlier madrassas included the teaching of the Qur'an and Hadith with increasing emphasis on fiqh with the passage of time. The emphasis on fiqh was aimed at providing trained people for the imperial courts. The subjects of mathematics, astronomy, and other human sciences were also taught in these madrassas. Thereafter, Muslim rulers, nobles and wealthy traders established madrassas in different areas. This system of Muslim education spread elsewhere in the Muslim world and Turkish rulers brought it to India when they consolidated their rule there. This leads to religious and socio-political transformation on Indian soil afterwards.

Madrassas in the Indian Subcontinent

The consolidation of the Muslim empire in the subcontinent facilitated the establishment of an organized educational system. Royal patronage was always available for this purpose. After the fall of Baghdad in 1257 A.D, a large number of scholars were attracted towards India. The courts of the Delhi Sultans were flooded with scholars and intellectuals from Central Asia. Some of the Sufis and scientists also migrated from Central Asia. They started preaching and teaching on their own without seeking royal patronage. They contributed to the conversion of large number of people of Indian Subcontinent to Islam.⁹ The traditional madrassas in India mostly taught Hanafi fiqh. The descendants of Central Asian ‘ulema’ were preferred for teaching. These institutions taught specially prescribed courses, which were not too rigid. Changes were introduced at different times, and, in some places, certain subjects were given more importance than others. But these changes were not affected in consequence of official interference.

Madrassas under British Colonial Rule

After the decline of Muslim political power had begun in the eighteenth century, the Europeans in the Subcontinent rapidly introduced modern education. In the changed context of sociopolitical life in the Subcontinent with the establishment of British Rule, the Ulema's role was also to be seen from a different context. Under Muslim rule, the Ulema had enjoyed special privileges. With the collapse of Muslim political authority this source of patronage, which strengthened their claim as representatives and leaders of the community, was lost. In the changed political context the ordinary Muslim also became more conscious about the survival of his faith. Therefore, a new relationship between the Ulema and the common Muslim was established under which the source of strength for the Ulema were common Muslims rather than the rulers of the time. Most of the reformist movements during the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century were led by Ulema with support from ordinary Muslims.

Growth of Madrassas in Pakistan After Independence in 1947

At Independence very few madrassas existed in Pakistan. Leading centers of Islamic education were situated in other parts of India. Pakistan inherited around 200 madrassas, which, as per the government's conservative estimates, and a BBC report has now increased to over 17,000, although some analysts put this number at 25–40,000. These religious schools cater for 2.5 to three million students and employ thousands of mullahs as teachers, mentors, and instructors.¹⁰ There are five Islamic schools of thought in Pakistan which operate their own systems of madrassas. They are Deobandi, Barelvi, Ahl-i Hadith, Jamat-i-Islami, and Ahl-i-Tasheh. Each school of thought organized madrassas under different boards that are responsible for registration, examinations, and syllabus.¹¹

Wafaqul-Madarisul-Arabiya: Central board of Sunni Deobandi institutions; established at Multan in 1960.

Tanzimul-Madaris: Central board of Sunni Barelvi institutions; established at Lahore in 1960.

Wafaqul-Madaris Shi'a: This board of Shia institutions was established in 1959 and has its centre in Lahore. Shia madrassas teach fiqh Jafariya named after Imam Jafer Sadiq, while other madrassas in Pakistan teach fiqh Hanafia.

Rabitahul-Madrisul-Islamiya: This board was established by the Jamaat-i-Islamiat Lahore in 1983, and recognizes the madrassas of all Islamic thought. They teach more modern subjects

Wafaqul-Madarisul-Salafiya: This board was established by the Ahl-i Hadith at Faisalabad in 1955.

Curriculum of Traditional Pakistani Madrassas

The syllabus in almost all traditional madrassas conforms to the basic structure and scholarly standard of the Dars-i-Nizami. The course of study in all madrassas except that of the Shia, revolves around the teaching of Hanafi fiqh. Most of the texts are 500 years or more old. These texts are taught with the help of commentaries and marginal notes penned by medieval Hanafi Ulema for South Asian students, who did not know Arabic well. They no longer explain the original text. They have to be learnt by heart, which makes students use only their memory, not their analytical powers. Thus the system functions with the effort that the old traditions are preserved. This led to the stagnation of knowledge which earned criticism not only from Western critics but also from Arabicknowing Pakistani Scholars.¹²

Students of Traditional Madrassas

While traditional madrassas attracted people from all social classes during the Mughal and Sultanat periods, now these madrassas cater for the children of the lower middle class, the peasantry, and the poor with few exceptions.¹³ This shift in student composition owes largely to the fact that education in a traditional Madrassa is no longer seen as providing its students with skills needed for lucrative occupations. Well-off Muslims send their children to regular schools or might arrange for a religious teacher to come to their homes to teach the Qur'an, and Islamic rituals, but few send them to full-time madrassas.¹⁴ As the Muslim education system characterizes rigid dualism between traditional madrassas and modern schools, it is important to note that a fairly large number of middle-class families send one of their wards to madrassas and the rest to regular schools. Some families known for their Islamic scholarship also carry on in an ancestral tradition by having at least one son trained as a religious teacher, while others are educated in schools and colleges.¹⁵

The students of madrassas belong to families having emotional attachment with a particular school of thought and send their children to the Madrassa of same fiqh. The followers of different sects mostly oppose each other due to which, the sectarian divide has become sharper and more violent in the society.¹⁶ Because of weak economic and social backgrounds the students are often reactionary and inflexible in their attitude and seek extremist ways for the realization of their ideological goals.¹⁷ Their understanding of the modern world is limited because teaching of modern subjects, games, literature, art and extracurricular activities are always ignored in most of the madrassas.¹⁸

In addition to madrassas in rural areas, the majority of students in madrassas in major cities of Pakistan also hail from rural areas. In Karachi, the Madrassa students represent all the districts of Pakistan.¹⁹ Pashto-speaking students always outnumber any other community.²⁰ The graduating students are normally 17 to 27 years old. The girl students are on an average younger than the boys. One reason for this is that their course duration is shorter than that of boys.²¹ Larger madrassas attract students from different parts of the country and from different communities.

Admission to a traditional Madrassa is relatively informal. While some have an entrance examination and fixed quotas at each level, others are more flexible. Larger madrassas have specific dates for application for admission, usually soon after the month of Ramzan. The schedule of admission is advertised through leaflets and wall posters. In smaller Madrassas, the procedure is much simpler and the students can join at any time of the year. They may not be able to afford to issue advertisements, and news of open admissions is spread simply by word of mouth. Most madrassas have a somewhat open admission policy with no rigid entrance requirements. Most madrassas charge no fee and also provide food, hostel accommodation and books free of cost.²² Thus, madrassas also serve as a kind of orphanage for those having no elders or relatives.

Management of Madrassas

Traditional madrassas are individual enterprises in Pakistan.

Larger madrassas are, however, run by an elaborate hierarchy of functionaries. At the apex is the Sarparast (Chancellor), who is also often the founder of the Madrassa or his successor, in such case he is generally a direct descendant of the founder. Below him is the Muhtamim (Vice Chancellor), who is followed by the Sadar (Dean) and teachers of different subjects. The senior most teacher is the Sheikh-ul-Hadith who teaches the books of Hadith to senior students. The rector of the Madrassa is assisted in his work by a committee of elders (shura) consisting of senior Ulema and teachers, and sometimes of notable Muslims including rich traders, philanthropists and important donors. In theory, elaborate rules govern the management of madrassas and all decisions are supposed to be taken through discussion and consensus. In practice, however, things are always very different. The managers and administrators often override the decision-making process for their personal interests.²³

Madrassa Finances

Traditional madrassas run on self-help. These rely on a variety of sources to meet their expenses. The vast majority depends on local funds, which are generated from within the community. Many madrassas have land or property endowed to them as waqfs from which they earn some income. Madrassa authorities regularly issue appeals to Muslims to contribute in cash or in any other kind. Such appeals appear in the publications of madrassas. Some people make donations to Madrassa as an act of piety. This is done in different ways, i.e. constructing a room in a Madrassa or donating fans or coolers or any other items of common use to madrassas simply to earn the blessing of Allah for living or deceased. The peasants of the localities also contribute in kind of grains after harvest. In smaller madrassas, teachers and even students are sent to neighbouring towns and villages to collect donations in cash and in kind. Larger madrassas appoint special staff to collect funds for the Madrassa on commission.²⁴ Beside this the administrators also accept financial help from those who earn money illegally, which negatively impacts the integrity of Ulema. The proper use of funds is also not ensured often.²⁵

Need for Madrassa Reforms

Reforming madrassas is a major concern. New developments at international level, especially the events of 11th September 2001, increased the importance of Madrassa reforms not only for Pakistan but also for the whole Muslim World. The Government of Pakistan and countries in the West, particularly America, are now eagerly seeking to enforce changes in the Madrassa system with the belief that non-reformed madrassas are rapidly emerging as major training grounds for terrorists. In addition, many Muslims, including the Ulema, are also at the forefront of demand for change in the Madrassa system. The different actors in this complex game have widely differing understandings of reforms, each reflecting their own particular agenda.

Agenda of Reforms and the President Musharraf Regime

The government policy towards reforms dates from August 2001, prior to the 11th September terrorist attacks on the USA. General Musharraf, the then President, underlined the need to curb the influence of religious institutions. His proposals included widening the Madrassa curricula and bringing them within the mainstream of education and prohibiting madrassas accepting students from other countries. As a part of the Madrassa reform program of the government, the National Education Policy 1999- 2010 had envisaged the major objectives in the context of the Madrassa. It included bridging the existing gulf between formal education and the madrassas; equating their degrees with the formal education system; recognising them and providing valuable and related books for research and reforms; and evolving an integrated system of national education by bringing madrassas and modern schools closer in the curriculum.²⁶ In line with these objectives the government initiated certain revolutionary steps for improvement of the working conditions of madrassas across the country.

The Pakistan Madrassa Education Board Ordinance, 2001

In the first instance an Ordinance called “The Pakistani Madrassas Education (Establishment and Affiliation of Model Dini [Religious] Madaris [Madrassas] Board Ordinance, 2001) was promulgated on August 18, 2001. The aim of this ordinance was to secure the registration, regulation, standardization and uniformity of curricula and standard of education of Madrassa imparting specialised Islamic education in Pakistan with the general education system.²⁷ The ordinance afforded representation of the different schools of thought in the Board. To start with, a Pakistan Madrassa Education Board under the provisions of this Ordinance was setup on 8 September 2001 under the control of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Ordinance, however, could not be properly enforced, as religious circles did not cooperate with the government. In this backdrop, the government reviewed its policy and initiated additional steps in the context of registration of madrassas, rationalizing of their syllabus and mainstreaming them.

Societies Registration Ordinance of 2005

This ordinance is also called the “Madrassas Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance, 2005”. Under its provisions “no Madrassa shall operate without getting itself registered; every Madrassa shall submit an annual report of its educational activities and performance to the registrar; every Madrassa shall cause to be carried out the audit of its accounts by an auditor and submit a copy of its audited report to the registrar; and no Madrassa shall teach or publish any literature which promotes militancy or spreads sectarianism or religious hatred”.²⁸

Madrassa Reforms Project (MRP)

The Madrassa Reform Project (MRP) is a part of the government comprehensive program for the reform of religious institutions in the country. The aim of the project is to teach formal subjects such as English, Mathematics, Pakistan Studies/Social Studies, and General Science along with religious education. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agreed between the federal, provincial and regional educational authorities for executing a multi-million rupees project for reforming 8,000 madrassas within five years was a ground-breaking event.²⁹

Concerns about Militancy by Foreigners in Madrassas

The role of the madrassas in national political developments and armed conflicts has been a subject of intense debate in Pakistan since 1980. Much of the armed resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was initially organised in the then North Western Frontier Province (now Khyber-Pakhtun Khwa) and Balochistan. Afghan and Pakistani madrassas students were in the forefront of the jihad movements against the communist regime. Dar ul-Ulum Haqqania of Akora Khattak near Peshawar and several other Deobandi madrassas played an important role in the mobilizing and recruitment of the thousands of volunteers for the Afghan jihad. The vast amounts of funds from Muslim countries received in the name of Afghan relief, and jihad projects were used for recruiting more students, expanding the madrassas, and also for sectarian activities, including the acquisition of weapons.³⁰ Later in the 1990s, these madrassas became major centers for training of foreign and indigenous warriors for jihad. According to Ahmad Rasheed, the Taliban primarily evolved from the dozens of madrassas established in the refugee camps along the Pak-Afghan border territories.³¹ Besides teaching, these children received hands-on training on some of the most lethal weapons in the world. The Taliban, as a result, soon became an invincible force.³² According to government sources, the madrassas that impart training to militants to fight the security forces also included the madrassa of Maulana Fazlullah, a key leader of the Tehreek-i-Nifazi-Shariat-i-Muhammadi (TNSM) Swat. A similar reference was also made to the madrassa of Maulana Liuqat in Bajaur. The same madrassa was later destroyed as a result of a drone attack.³³

Response of Madrassas to Madrassa Registration Ordinance

According to Madrassa Registration and Control Ordinance 2002, promulgated in August 2002, no Madrassa would function without government permission. The officials of the Madrassa Authority would monitor the activities of madrassas, and no Madrassa would accept foreign financial help without government permission. The representatives of madrassas of four schools of thought rejected the said ordinance. They were of the opinion that ‘measures like registration, change of curriculum, and mainstreaming madrassas were aimed at depriving them of their independence and to destroy their Islamic identity.’³⁴ They claimed that all such measures were a part of the American agenda to secularize the educational system, which madrassas would resist at any cost’. However they assured their support to the government against madrassas involved in sectarianism, terrorism or possessing weapons, provided solid proofs existed in this regard.

Prospects of Reforms

An analysis of the response of madrassas to state-sponsored reforms during the last eight years has attracted deep suspicion among the madrassas. How to address this challenge is a big question? A number of options are available which require strong steps by the government that are accompanied by potential political risks. For these reforms, there should be a formal regulatory mechanism, developed with due understanding and after a legislation. It should encourage registration, create concomitant statutory obligation on the registered entity and its sponsors by way of governance, financial accountability, and responsibility towards society.³⁵ The reform efforts should build around following:-

- 1- Registration of Madrassa as well as private schools for quality control purposes is essential. However, to give more credibility to the efforts, this process could be best managed at the provincial level with minimum interference from Federal Government.
- 2- Construction of madrassas on public lands must be scrutinized more carefully.
- 3- Inclusion of local council representatives in the management committee or board of directors of madrassas in order to ensure that locals are involved in the working of madrassas.
- 4- There is a need to set up an interdepartmental committee to steer the reform agenda.
- 5- Measures to ensure that the local students representation is more than the external students in urban madrassas.
- 6- Job provision to the Madrassas graduates through apprenticeship programmes to make them more productive members of the society.
- 7- Curriculum to ensure that hatred based on sect and language does not develop, and the students get balanced education.
- 8- English, General Science, Social Studies, Social Sciences, Literature, modern Philosophy, Computer, Mathematics, Accounts and Economics etcbe included in Madrassa syllabus. This will broaden their mental horizon make their thinking logical and respect others' thought, lives and values.

Conclusion

The institution of the Madrassa is about a thousand years old. As a system of Muslim education, it has always played an important role in teaching and preservation of Islam. It also played this role in the lives of millions of Muslims of the Subcontinent from eighth century AD onwards. However, after establishment of British colonial rule here, a modern system of education was introduced. That modern education system, by default, became a rival of Madrassas. They opposed it tooth and nail, and it was regarded as European (non-Muslim) and a privilege of modern and rich Muslims. The modern education also threatened the traditional hold, role and authority of the religious leaders. The polarization between the two institutions increased manifold with the passage of time. This schism impacted every aspect of Muslims of Subcontinent lives and shaped two politically opposed ideologies amongst those who studied in the different educational systems. The same bi-polar system of education was inherited by Pakistan after its independence in 1947. The Madrassas were playing an important role in the social and religious lives of Muslims, and still act as NGOs, looking after poor and orphan. But after the negative focus in post 9/11 scenario the madrassas feel isolated and perhaps unduly targeted. They cautiously guard their turf and regard the modernisation, integration measures and calls for increased transparency in their financial matters as interference.

Being predominantly a Muslim country, Pakistan cannot simply ignore this important educational cum social welfare system. In order to counter the negative perceptions about them and reported negative role of few of these, Musharraf government took multiple steps including introduction of two ordinances, to monitor and regulate their activities and to reform their syllabi. Such moves did not bear desired fruits as Madrassas owners became more critical of these measures with the passage of time. The Madrassas Reform Project (MRP) initiated for reforming the curriculum of Madrassas during Musharraf Regime almost failed to achieve its objectives, partly because of opposition from madrassas, but mainly because of the insufficient preparation and lack of determined implementation of the legislations due to the fear of violent reactions from Madrassas.

After ongoing operation against the terrorists the environment is considered more conducive for renewing the reform efforts. The present government should therefore not abandon the efforts of reforming Madrassas. It should proceed further after strengthening the laws and regulations on the subject. After ensuring better coordination amongst all relevant state organs, the government must give Madrassas a chance to come under governmental control. Their finances should be kept transparent. Their syllabus should be a balanced mix of religious and modern education. Madrassa students should be awarded appropriate degrees opening avenues of progression, higher education and better job security for them. Government's absolute sincerity and determination for the reform agenda will be essential for better future of Pakistan. Before moving further all political parties and Madrassas' administration should be taken into confidence.

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