

Madrasahs in India



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Foremost among the institutions that have come under scrutiny post 9/11 are the madrasahs. All across the globe, these once revered and venerated centres of learning are now seen as 'nurseries of sedition', 'factories of fundamentalists' and 'hotbeds of terrorism'. While this is not without reason, their exaggerated role in the spread of violence and terrorism is providing the impetus for their transmutation into more militant and orthodox forms, accentuating the security dilemma. This issue brief seeks to dispel some of the common myths associated with madrasahs in India and assess the security threat, if any, emanating from them.

History and Role of Madrasahs in India

Presently, there are an estimated 35,000 madrasahs in India, big as well as small¹ with an enrolment of about 1.5 million.² According to Leiden E J Brill's Encyclopedia of Islam, 'madrasah' is an institution of learning, where Islamic sciences, including literary and philosophical studies, are taught. The Encyclopedia traces the history of madrasahs in India back to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in 1206AD. Initially the institution was a vibrant one, catering to the needs of its patrons - the rulers of the day. Known as the source for supply of administrators and judges, the institution witnessed its zenith during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal dynasty periods.

The madrasah was originally meant to be a purely religio-cultural institution, aimed at preserving and propagating Islamic traditions. It was devoid of any political agenda or ideology. However, the political patronage that they were receiving enabled them to influence policy-making in an advisory role. With the passage of time,

madrasahs lost their sheen and utility. Especially the post-Mughal period saw the waning of madrasahs as 'centres of knowledge and excellence'. To make matters worse, even the institution got enmeshed in a vice-like grip of orthodoxy and conservatism, leading to its stagnation and subsequent downfall.

During the British era, the madrasah movement revived once again with the establishment of Darul Uloom at Deoband in 1866. The institute played the dual role of disseminating Islamic knowledge along with mobilizing the Indian Muslims to participate in the freedom struggle, aimed at expelling the British. Thus the orthodox ulama accepted the secular policies of the INC during the nineteenth century.³ This dispels the first canard about madrasahs being the seat of discontent and possessing anti-India and anti-secular sentiments from the very outset.

However, their strong nationalist fervor got diluted when a section of the Muslim elite made a clarion call for a separate nation based on the two-nation theory. Though this development led to a metamorphosis in the basic framework and functioning of madrasahs, it is worth mentioning that not all Muslims supported the creation of a separate Muslim state. This dismisses the second canard that Muslims are a monolithic entity with a single voice and opinion. This has not been the case either in the past or the present.

Though many madrasahs were instrumental in propagating and furthering the ideology of a distinct Muslim identity, a larger number continued to support the secular cause. Unfortunately, the damage done by the former category was irreparable and irreversible. The consciousness of a separate identity that was fostered later became the root cause for the Hindu-Muslim cleavage that

remains deeply entrenched to this day. Madrassas came to be identified thereafter as seats of secession by their Hindu counterparts. This feeling was further strengthened in the post independence era when madrassas continued to remain inward looking and exclusivist in their approach, despite all the Constitutional safeguards provided to accommodate them. This behaviour negated their chances of joining the mainstream and led to their further alienation.

Problem Areas

The madrassa system faces many challenges, most of which are internally generated and some externally caused. These challenges impinge on the prospects of survival of the madrassa system and the security environment of the nation. Some of these problem areas are spelt out below:

- **Lack of an alternate system of education**

For the largely impoverished Muslim community, formal English education is beyond their reach. Madrassas are the only hope of education for these millions, however rudimentary and outmoded they may be. An argument made here is that 'part of the reason why they flourish is because the state has not done enough to promote "secular" education in mofussil towns and the rural hinterland. Hence, children of poor

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Muslim families flock to religious schools. Given the limited access to state-run or state-aided schools, religious schools provide space for education and cultural-religious survival for the deprived'.⁴

- **Religious compulsion**

Madrassas represent the Muslim proletariat, for whom religion is the shortest and surest road to salvation; hence madrassas are the means. As an analyst aptly puts it, "the unemployed and underemployed men of Islam produced by these madrassas were by and large forced to become

self-proclaimed holy warriors of their faith".⁵ Bereft of growth opportunities, the so-called 'jehadis' or Holy Warriors are a product of circumstances rather than choice. Islam centric teaching of madrassas is not compatible with the contemporary job market. Lack of job opportunities plunges them into economic stagnation. Frustrated, many youth take up cudgels against the state and the society in the name of 'jihad'.

- **Forced ghettoisation**

The Muslim community in India is a victim of twin ghettoization - firstly, at the hands of their own leaders, and secondly, by the Hindu majority. Madrassa education encourages students to imitate and emulate but remain within the parochial confines of the syllabi. It discourages thinking independently.⁶ The culture of reasoning and questioning is deliberately nipped in the bud to produce obedient followers rather than thinking and rational human beings. Such unquestioning obedience serves the purposes of the Muslim clergy and elite, who wish to maintain their stronghold by manipulating an illiterate mass. As for the majoritarian population, they did their bit by exacerbating the fears of Muslims. The media regularly portrayed the madrassas as "ghettos of antiquity, orthodoxy and obscurantism".⁷ They were provided with scant opportunities to be a part of the mainstream, citing their own inadequacies as the underlying reason.

The Security Dimension

In view of their historical role and internal infirmities, madrassas became a visible threat to national security. The security dimension can be assessed under two broad heads deriving from two epochal events - Babri Masjid and 9/11.

- **National Security and the Ayodhya Factor**

Islam as a religion calls for discipline and strict adherence to the word of God. The Quran (Holy Scripture) and Hadith (Prophets' Teachings) are final and binding upon Muslims. Rigidity and obscurantism stems from the absence of any scope for reinterpretation and updating of religious scriptures to meet contemporary requirements. The sacrosanct nature of the scriptures makes the law of the land inconsequential. Blinded by religious precepts, it is difficult to urge the supremacy of the rule of law

among Muslims. This creates a serious law and order problem. Educational policy based on exclusivism further strengthens Muslim communal consciousness at the expense of national unity. The rise of fascist forces provided an impetus to this sorry state of affairs. The nadir reached with the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992, sending shock waves through the Muslim community. The secular edifice of Indian democracy came tumbling down with the Masjid, along with the last vestiges of mutual trust. This episode provided the breeding ground for fundamentalist elements with anti-national designs to mobilize the unemployed and disgruntled products of the madrassas to be a part of the terrorist agenda. During the last five years, nearly 200 madrassas have sprung up in various troubled states. About 88 madrassas have been established in West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura and another 89 madrassas have sprung up in UP and Bihar. ⁸ Some madrassas are suspected to be used by the ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) to indoctrinate young, impressionable minds for future terrorist activities. ⁹ These statistics are indicative of the strong linkage between poor governance and security threat. In the words of a former SIMI (Students Islamic Movement of India) activist, "Before this (the Babri Masjid episode), SIMI was working to boost the morale of youths, to spread education and awareness about Islam. The demolition of Babri Masjid changed all that". ¹⁰ Things could never be the same again post Babri Masjid. The communal divide became a harsh reality of everyday life; Gujarat carnage being the culmination.

- **National Security in the post 9/11 era**

India has been waging a long battle against terrorism, dating back to the late 80's. However, recent years have witnessed an exponential growth in militancy with a concomitant growth in madrassas. The developments over the years indicate a definitive role for madrassas in the security equation of the nation. For instance, there are about 60 madrassas across the Valley. Though the first such madrasa, the Darul Uloom Dandipora, came up in Kashmir in the early '70s, the past decade - coinciding with militancy - has seen a mushrooming of these religious schools. ¹¹ These statistics attribute a role for madrassas in the proliferation of terrorism in various parts of the

country. The alarming fact is that the reach and functioning of madrassas has acquired spatial dimensions e.g. 367 madrassas have mushroomed within a 10 km belt on the Indian side of the Indo-Nepal border; 195 on the Nepal side. Similarly on the Indo-Bangladesh border, 445 madrassas operate in 22 bordering districts of West Bengal while 156 madrassas are operational on the Bangladesh side. ¹² Their funding sources has got internationalized following the oil boom in the Gulf. Petro dollars were diverted to the spread of Islam in various parts of the world, including India. Intelligence reports reveal that extremist Muslim fundamentalist organizations in countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, Libya and Sudan created a 'special fund' of more than 3,000 crores for the purpose of setting up new mosques and more madrassas in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of India. This provided an impetus to the spread of Islamic fundamentalism via the madrassas.

Need for Reforms

As a noted Muslim scholar points out, "Madrassas are plagued by two major problems. First, their managers brook no intrusion in their special field of instruction and second is the unchanging character of the curriculum". ¹³ Both these problems can be addressed through internal reforms. What the government can or should do on its part is to encourage and support the internal reform process by providing it moral and material support. In the words of a noted Islamic scholar, Mohammed Mukarram, the government ought to be more pro-active because madrassas provide a modicum of education to millions of youngsters who - because of extreme poverty and inaccessibility - slip through the cracks of the formal school system. ¹⁴ Madrassas should not be a party to vote bank politics. Many parties and politicians turn a blind eye to the activities of madrassas initially because of vote bank politics e.g. 20% of the CPM vote bank in West Bengal comprise Muslims. Hence they not only overlook the harmful activities of Muslims within the border but also the incoming Bangladeshi migrants. ¹⁵ By the time they take cognizance of the threat, it is far too late. One must take a cue from the sweeping reforms announced by Gen. Musharraf post 9/11. Some of the suggestions in this direction are as follows:

- Institutionalize the madrasa system.
- Change the syllabus to include contemporary educational and job requirements.
- Audit funds received by them, especially those coming from foreign donors.
- Dispel the shroud of secrecy and make them accountable in their functioning.
- Provide avenues of employment and growth for products of madrasas.
- Provide state patronage and funding to these institutions, enabling the state to play a constructive role.

Conclusion

The saving grace is that Indian madrasas are not a part of mainstream politics like their Pakistani counterparts, which have several of their Ulamas joining active politics, and going on to become members of Parliament and even ministers. More importantly, they are not yet a part of the transnational Pan-Islamic network of Al-Qaeda, as seen by the 9/11 attacks and after. At most they are reactions to domestic problems caused by bad governance and accentuated by petty vote bank politics as seen in states like UP, Bihar and J & K. Hence, it can be safely said that madrasas in India continue to be bastions of Islamic knowledge and tradition rather than political Islam. However, if left unattended they can take a sinister twist and cause real and immediate security threat. To accommodate them into the mainstream would require concrete and deliberate attempts by the government and the Muslim community, in particular, the clergy. This requires a change in the mindset of both the parties concerned - the Muslims and the government. A good beginning by the government would be to acknowledge the fact that the problem is not with the madrasas per se but madrasa style terrorist camps funded by external agencies. A realization by the Muslims of the need for revamping the syllabus and opening up their services to other communities can be a good starting point and is in their own interest.

Endnotes

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