

Madrasas in Pakistan: thinking beyond terrorism-based reforms*

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Introduction

UNESCO's 2009 Education for All report portrays Pakistan as a despairing case with over 3.7 million out-of-school children – a figure that is likely to double by 2015. By detailing obstacles such as governance and potentially innovative solutions such as public-private partnerships, it rightly acknowledges wider social and political problems that haunt the state of education. The missing element in it, however, is that of religious schools or madrasas. Given that their role in education is ignored even locally, that should not come as a surprise. Madrasas are often seen as a backward and traditional, if necessary, evil – an image that has been exacerbated by the terrorism debate. That said, their positive roles are completely ignored.

That does not mean that madrasas are without problems. Indeed, there are numerous issues that even the most ardent supporters would not argue against. However, the question to be asked is whether these are inherent disorders in the madrasa system; that is to say, whether a traditional setup is by definition deficient or its problems are the result of broader societal issues.

In this paper we aim to highlight madrasas' importance to Pakistan and consequent issues that go beyond terrorism. Severe polarization of opinion threatens to destroy a delicate social fabric with disastrous consequences and yet madrasas' strong presence dictates that they should be central points of social policies; unfortunately, their role has been reduced to politics. The question to be addressed then is; how has a focus on militancy and reforms undermined madrasas in their position as social, religious as well as educational institutions within the overall educational setup of Pakistan?

The diversity of madrasas

The blanket term madrasa is often used without knowledge of intricacies within the elaborate system – a literary crime that both Eastern and Western academics commit. They are highly heterogeneous institutions, with major differences even within formal denominations. By professing to counter extremism through generic reforms, policy makers place an innocuous one-room institution for five students studying the Quran in the evenings, a reputed university with thousands of students being taught sciences and religion, as well as a strident radicalized institution preaching violence on the same platform - an etymological dilemma that needs to be clarified at the outset.

The madrasa system in Pakistan is organized through five boards of varying ideologies, with the overwhelming presence of Deobandi schools that cover over 70 per cent of all registered madrasas (Rahman, 2004). Having a rich history, this tradition garners much respect but also faces criticism of being hard-line and giving rise to militancy – although Deobandi scholars have taken pains to distance the school from, for instance, the Taliban.

Extremism and fundamentalism have become buzzwords in the global war on terror, and are continually attached to madrasas. Have they become mere scapegoats or do they offer a solution to the problem? Moreover, are the weaknesses of madrasas due to their internal conflicts or only the natural limitations found in any educational system? These are questions that must be looked into before a politically motivated rhetoric of madrasa reform is enunciated as the only possible solution of the madrasa 'problem'. As Ahmad (2004) argues, it goes without saying they these are conservative institutions as their primary motive is to preserve the integrity of tradition. Hence, part of the answer lies in establishing whether critics are against traditionalism per se or it is problems of the madrasa system they wish to remove.

Madrasas and the global challenge

It is a global paradigm within which madrasas should ideally be studied. The 'controversial process' of globalization of culture with Western norms of consumerism and individualism is perceived to be progress in the modern world (Edwards, et al., 1999). Marx, Hegel and Weber are among those who see religion diminishing as modernization occurs (Keddie, 2003); many see Islam in particular to be a hindrance to economic growth. With such frameworks offering the best-known development paths, it is only natural that dominant ideals of political, economic and social thought tend to be sceptical of traditional bodies.

Madrasas might well be the sole institutions that have rejected this thesis to such an extent. Hence, when Watt (1961) contends that Western dominance has developed two strands of intellectual thought in Muslim countries– the religious and the secular – it is clearly madrasas that are the primary upholders of the former. But, does traditionalism essentially mean rejection of development, and contemporarily, does madrasa education lead to terrorism? While posing Islamist ‘neofundamentalism’ as a real problem of this century, Roy (2004) in his study of globalized Islam answers in the negative on both counts.

Revival of interest in madrasas

Why then are madrasas of such interest to policy makers and academics alike? Firstly, much has been written about their rich history, often in glorifying terms, and of scholarly traditions, progression in sciences, literature and medicine, which is far from the rejectionist assumption we hold today. Formal institutionalization and State support has also historically elevated them (for instance, Keay, 1964; Metcalf, 1982; Makdisi, 1974; Kadi, 2006).

Secondly, charity and education are considered acts of worship in Islam that combine to give madrasas special characteristics. Bano (2007a) suggests that this creates strong social relations that are beneficial for economic and religious reasons. As a result, madrasas are able to operate autonomously with their own curriculum and become philanthropic bodies that provide free education, boarding and food for students.

Power dynamics and the link with the State is a third aspect that has traditionally been a fascinating area of study, and one that has tarnished the madrasa image (Talbani, 1996). Similar issues exist also in non-madrasa institutions and so need to be contextually studied keeping in mind broader socio-economics.

These larger schemas of respect, charity, religious knowledge and power by no means dominate the debate in current times. Rather, it is their roles as alternative educational providers, as institutions deeply embedded in the ‘social fabric’, and allegedly as schools teaching militancy that subject them to contemporary policy discourse. Their

vitality, vibrancy and mystique make madrasas a complex subject at the best of times; current challenges make this study even more relevant, if also inevitably complex, as madrasas continue to prosper in the face of ambiguous assessment from various sides.

State of education in Pakistan

Jamal (1996) asserts that madrasas in Pakistan are important in four ways – as part of educational policies, in Islamization drives, as recruitment of clergy, and for their social impact. Hence, it is necessary first to place them within the overall educational setup of the country, and to examine the importance of Islam in education policy.

The Pakistan Education Statistics handbook gives appalling figures of literacy with only 40 per cent of 70 million children between the ages of five and 19 enrolled in school (Zaidi, 2009). Marginalized groups fare far worse, and madrasas remain the only realistic choice for a large number as private schools do not cater to the masses. Moreover, massive learning gaps exist between private and State school students, the former performing much better on academics (Das, et al., 2006) and enjoying enormously higher returns on education (Asadullah, 2009).

Khalid and Khan (2006) divide this system into six class-based categories that perpetuate social differences, while Hetland (2008) puts madrasas at the core of a three-tier system, together with public and private schools and cautions against dismissing their educational role. Bukhari and Rahman (2006) similarly maintain that madrasas' educational role needs to be recognized. But, considerable uncertainty in madrasa numbers creates problems when integrating them into policies.

Some, such as Singer (2001), suggest that they are popular enough to threaten displacement of State education, while Andrabi et al. (2005) in an influential World Bank study quote low figures of one per cent students studying in madrasas. While much lower than the exaggerated 33 per cent reported by the International Crisis Group and later corrected as a mathematical error (Fair, 2007), it too has been heavily criticized (Candland, 2005; Riaz, 2008). Riaz shows that recently quoted figures have ranged from 5,000 to 20,000 for madrasa numbers and 700,000 to 1.8 million for students, and that even oft-quoted figures are estimates at best.

This ambiguity is unfortunate but unavoidable since records exist only for registered madrasas at the district level and even those are woefully out of date. Moreover, since madrasa boards are not monitored, their record-keeping might also be lacking in substance. And, since academic interest is only a recent development, perhaps the much needed number-crunching will start only now.

Islamic education

Nelson (2008a) contends that a clear majority in Pakistan wants Islamic education. Secularization attempts lead to unnatural privatization of religion, which is problematic in such a society. Madrasas then face ideological domination from secular institutions that view education as “a vertically organized system to transmit a unitary body of knowledge as opposed to the idea of segmented and relatively autonomous sources of knowledge and life-wisdom, which the madrasa system represents.” (Riaz, 2008: 10)

For Eickelman and Piscatori (2004), the rise of secular education has in fact caused the madrasa system to expand with community support. However, Nelson (2008b) argues that since most parents seek both religious and secular components in education, the former remains significant even in non-madrasa institutions. Indeed, national educational plans for the period 1998-2010 (MoE, 1998) wanted a comprehensive Islamic framework and the latest policy (MoE, 2009) virtually regurgitates this.

Regardless of motives, State desire to promote Islam in schools and subsequently improve madrasas is evident, but claims are often derided as there has been no serious attempt at implementation. Bukhari and Rahman (2006) hence argue that madrasas are required simply because the State has not been able to come up with alternatives. In these circumstances, even if madrasas are berated by a significant lobby, the masses continue to support them.

Socioeconomics and reasons for madrasa growth

Analyzing socioeconomics of madrasa students is necessary for developing adequate policy measures. Mazari (2009) and Nayyar (1998) view madrasa students as the poorest of the poor for whom free education is a tremendous incentive. Hussain (2007) adds that the typical student is from the poorest sectors, broken homes or is an orphan mostly from rural areas seeking education, lodging and meals. However, as Rahman (2004) stresses, madrasa influence on urban proletariat is also blatant.

Ahmad (2004) argues that while madrasas are filled overwhelmingly with the poor, these are not the poorest of society. Significantly, some reports assert that many students attend secular schools before dropping out due to poverty (Malik 1996, Hussain 2007, Rahman 2004).

Interestingly, while Bano (2007a) and Anderson et al. (2009) in two impressively authentic studies agree that many students attended government schools before joining madrasas, they attribute this to poor quality of education and parents' religious inclination, whereas madrasa education is more rewarding both academically and spiritually. Both the studies highlight that many students are neither from the lowest income groups nor from rural areas, and agree that free education is an attractive but not the most important factor for enrolment.

Andrabi et al. (2006) also dismiss the notion that madrasas are the last resort of the poor; they find similarities in madrasa and government school student profiles. In fact, the former are deemed to have a larger number of rich students.

Bano's study covers a large urban madrasa and hence by her own admission should not be generalized. However, the previously dominant notion that madrasa students are from the rural poor also seems to have lost its credibility. The presumption, however, has remained stuck and madrasas continue to be regarded as mainly social welfare networks. While this may indeed be the case for many, policy measures require all potential development aspects including education and female empowerment to also be addressed regardless of popular opinion.

Gender dynamics

Being conservative institutions, madrasas are regarded to be biased towards male students. However, recent studies quote a high figure of 30 per cent of all madrasa students being females (Anderson et al., 2009; Butt, 2009; Hetland 2008). This was unheard of before the 1970s, but madrasas are now educating almost a quarter of a million females and contributing over half of all graduates each year. Bano (cited in Ebrahim, 2008) explains female madrasa education as even more distinctly choice-based rather than related to poverty as many female madrasas actually charge nominal fees.

Female madrasas have been criticized for promoting gender disparities being single-sex schools, which Qasmi (2005) stresses is important due to religious injunctions as well as social and educational norms. Also under scrutiny is their curriculum which according to Ali and Farooq (2007) is devoid of secular subjects and tries to domesticate women, hence disempowering them. Denuelin and Bano (2009), however, cover the events of Laal Masjid involving female students' aggressive protests against the State to argue that "female madrasas are not just domesticated tools but rather empowered institutions."

Female education is a substantial part of the madrasa phenomenon, but different from male madrasas and requires extensive study. However, the numbers alone show that presumptions of a gender-bias are perhaps exaggerated. And, if enrolment is choice-based, this idea loses further appeal. The difference in male and female curricula, though, leaves policy makers and the clergy with significant food for thought.

Madrasa life and education

Contrasting views of life in and after madrasa education manifest further polarized views on the issue. Hussain (2007) sees them as strict institutions with inhumane conditions, while Ebrahim (2008) condemns even the large madrasas for lack of leisurely activities beyond sports. Other more damning critiques report incidents of torture and sex abuse (Murphy, 2005), while also being critical of the clergy who lure poor families for self-interest (Das, 2008).

Rahman (2004), however, contends that life is simple but not harsh, and Bano (2007a) particularly highlights students' attachment to their institution and teachers. Even

education quality is deemed by Hetland (2008) to be much better than public schools and “definitely better than common perception.” It is safe to assume that, similar to non-madrassa schools, realities would differ from place to place.

Furthermore, curriculum comes under attack with allegations of rejecting modernity and persevering with a syllabus that leads to almost no economic ends (Chaudhry 2005, Jalal 2008, Hussain 2007). Others such as Tavernise (2009) declare a little unwittingly that madrasas teach little beyond memorization of the Quran. Indeed, such an analysis is not rare, and is an example of widespread confusion between makhtabs and madrasas, with the former not to be considered educational institutes per se.

This curriculum, the Dars-e-Nizamiya, has a rich history and is shared by most madrasas in the country (Metcalf, 1982). Academically vast and structurally organized, it has eight or 16 years’ programmes divided into six levels, each being equivalent to corresponding levels in mainstream education. Ahmad (2004) argues that only eight of the 20 subjects are absolutely religious, but since facilities are limited, only the larger madrasas are able to teach them completely, with often the secular subjects being sacrificed. As a result, economic opportunities are almost non-existent, being limited to the religious sector. However, this might be a deliberate strategy since otherwise religious inclination would decrease and madrasas might end up being overcrowded.

Opportunities after education

Bano (2007a) describes how students teach the Quran to neighbourhood children and many gain employment as imams or khateebis even before graduation, while still others pursue higher studies. Indeed, even as graduates of secular schools are unemployed in large numbers, it is rare to find a madrasa graduate unemployed (Ahmad, 2004). Similarly, Qasmi (2005) states that if a student wants to make a livelihood working in a spiritually rewarding if low-paying job, he should be admired, not condemned.

Of late, modern sciences and computer education have broadened the scope for madrasa students (Khokhar, 2007), and many have benefited from technical education in a variety of fields (Hafeez and Koppen, 2005), creating opportunities to practice another trade for economic self-sufficiency while continuing education based on religion.

Chances are low that many would opt for a career completely out of scope of religion, although it does not seem inconceivable that the two could go hand in hand.

It can be gauged then that the educational, economic and living standards of students generally correspond to the level, size and capacity of the madrasa itself. And while it would not be wrong to say that the curriculum needs to be taught more effectively, it also needs to be understood that the social standing attached to a career in the religious sector can be very rewarding. Nonetheless, madrasas need to be constantly seeking to improve their image and functioning so that their considerable influence can be positively perpetuated and their identity redeemed.

Funding, support and society

Madrasas appear under five ideological boards, providing adherents with a clergy of sorts. While the most popular claim is that madrasas are financed by politically and religiously affiliated foreign and local bodies, Rahman (2004) contends that it is charity that causes them to flourish. Financial information is jealously guarded by the clergy; Ebrahim (2008) notes that divulging sources is troublesome since many individuals do not want their acts of charity to be publicized and philanthropists abroad are wary of being linked with terrorism.

Much funding also comes from the community where donations are the result of rational judgment and even sceptics of madrasas' worth tend to donate generously due to a sense of social responsibility for communal projects (Bano, 2007a). Indeed, in a typical community, religious leaders are more reliable providers of social services than corrupt State functionaries (Stonehill, 2006) and donations are correlated to their reputations which are under numerous social checks (Bano, 2007a), so chances of corruption are minimized.

As Ahmad (2004) notes, the social role of the clergy is significant; in addition to preserving valuable traditions, they play prominent roles in legal decisions, rituals, weddings, funerals and become a requirement for societies. Essentially then, communities and madrasa are in a mutually dependent relationship that is trivialized when the madrasa is reduced to a political entity. For all their faults, given how deeply embedded they are in the social fabric of any community; it is pertinent to wonder why

mainstream schools have not endeavoured to produce graduates with similar religious qualifications. Perhaps the answer lies in the allegations of terrorism.

Terrorism, madrasas and government schools

Interest in madrasas has increased exponentially in the last decade owing to the threat of terrorism, while previously published work, mostly by Muslim writers, tended to look at the historical and social domains.

Portrayal of madrasas post-9/11 as largely militant institutions, argues Riaz (2008), is exaggerated at best. Interestingly, Sareen (2005) blames government schools for spreading extremism on a mass scale. In his first-hand study of northern madrasas, Rana (2003) produces multiple political and ideological affiliations, calling terrorism a real threat primarily due to the U.S.-Pakistan collaboration in the 1980s.

The sudden mushrooming of militant madrasas in the 1980s is almost solely attributed to global politics of the Cold War, in what was a deliberate attempt to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by the USA and Pakistan using massive aid and in the process creating the Taliban (Mortenson and Relin, 2006; Jalal, 2008). Dalrymple (2005) looks at this phenomenon from an even larger spectrum, assessing that the Afghan-Soviet war, Middle Eastern oil boom and the Saudi will to preach a specific version of Islam led to a rise in madrasas all over the world in the mid-1980s and not just in Pakistan. Interestingly, Bukhari and Rahman (2006) contend that this was a time of State withdrawal from all services and a corresponding phenomenal growth is seen in private institutions and NGOs as well.

It has since become an established fact that madrasas do play a large part in spreading sectarianism and extremism. For Riaz (2008), such analyses have a major shortcoming in that they do not take madrasas to be part of a social whole, but rather as entities in themselves. He notes that madrasas do “create and perpetuate sectarianism, but sectarianism and militancy do not necessarily pose a threat to global security.” (p 3.)

Magnier (2009), while largely critical of madrasas, assesses that a vast majority of them are benign, but several hundred are a menace to be treated harshly. Unsurprisingly then, others including Fair(2007), Mazari (2009), Hetland (2008) and Riaz (2008) concur with this view, maintaining that the madrasa reputation is being tarnished by the unorthodox religiosity of a minority that finds roots in political rather than religious grounds.

Lately, policy measures that have focused entirely on terrorism while ignoring issues of curriculum development and teacher training have been condemned. Fair (2007) asserts that while sectarianism and anti-Americanism are indeed a part of the madrasa mindset, they are equally rife in non-madrasa institutes. Dalrymple (2005) adds that madrasas are not capable of producing the educated and technically gifted people who carry out large-scale attacks. Indeed, while most madrasa students are poor, 'Islamic terrorism' remains 'largely a bourgeois endeavor'.

There is however, evidence of teaching hardcore militancy, map skills, killing techniques in madrasas (Babajanov and Olcott, 2003). The CIA, USAID and University of Nebraska textbooks provided to madrasas to teach such militancy survive to day (Hussain, 2007; Fair, 2007) and many, though not all, suicide bombers and terrorists are recognized to be madrasa students (Tavernise, 2009). Hence, while possibly exaggerated, terrorism remains a real and potential threat that nonetheless needs to be dealt with. The issue then becomes separating the educational centre from the militant one.

It is necessary to appreciate the complexities in dealing with madrasas, given their appeal for common people, Islamists and politicians alike. Factors such as free education, respect for Islamic knowledge and teachers, active roles in community life, non-materialism, preservation of tradition and the use of charity make madrasas uniquely remarkable institutions. Yet there remain doubts in terms of curriculum usefulness, negative worldviews, economic and educational limitations as well as militancy links, although it is almost a unanimous view now that the latter is limited to a small minority.

Many of the problems and allegations regarding madrasas are based on politics rather than any facets inherent in the madrasa system. Others, such as sectarianism, are ubiquitous dogmas all over the country. A nuanced approach is necessary if these are to be dealt with. However, the reform process – and there have been many in the past –

has to be depoliticized if it is to achieve potential goals of educational, economical, social and religious fulfilment as well as withdrawal of terrorism.

The reform process

Any discussion on the diversity and problems of madrasas shows that decisions based on a generalized understanding are always going to be flawed. There are tangible as well as intangible differences in madrasas depending on their size, student strength, ideological dimensions, reputation as well as locality.

Before examining how State policies have fared, it is essential to understand the roots of mistrust between the clergy and the State. Whether this suspicion is real or imagined, the fact is that State-led reforms always face a tough task. Even the term 'reform' has a hint of patronization in it. Firstly, it implies that the system needs restructuring; secondly, it comes from an external source often at the behest of the State. A favourable approach would be to scrutinize different problems contextually rather than an overhaul of the system altogether. However, reform remains the favoured idea so far.

There is one paradox that is ignored in the process of reform: if one reason for madrasa popularity is the failure of State provision in the first place, then how is it that a new system will be supported given the existing financial and managerial weaknesses in State schools? Spending on education is abysmal with annual budgets giving it a mere 2.2 per cent of the country's GDP (Zaidi, 2009). In such circumstances, how is the State going to take over an established system of education, albeit with its own weaknesses, and cover additional costs in completely untested waters? Surely, treating madrasas within the reform process of the entire education system is more relevant, and in which case, public education needs to take precedence.

Past experience with reforms

Interestingly, it is during military regimes that the three major madrasa reforms have been attempted. That could be simply because the longevity of governance allowed them to look into matters that may not be prioritized otherwise. Or perhaps they were looking for legitimacy through religious endeavours. Or even perhaps they did not need significant support of the clergy. Moreover, these were all in times when the country was enjoying significantly cordial relationships with the developed world and policies were largely dictated to suit political needs. The possibilities could be endless, but nonetheless strengthen the claim that the madrasa issue has been severely politicized.

The first of these reforms in 1962 followed a strategy of controlling financial sources and changing the curriculum. This was an effort to control the meaning of Islam and undermining the clergy's authority and the juncture from where, argues Zaman (1998), a clear rift between secularism and traditionalism began to emerge.

This argument does have its merits – this was a time when what is now called the modernization approach to development was a path being followed. Similar strategies of modernization and secularization were being opted for in Iran; madrasas being just one of the institutions being restructured. However, the clergy resisted and, apart from producing some reports that have since become part of the secularization-traditionalism debate, these reforms were widely condemned.

The next attempt in 1979, as part of the Islamization drive, was comparatively serious. Unlike before, there were some influential ulema on the reform committee. However, Riaz (2008) and Malik (1996) argue that this was just a strategy to avoid confrontation and these reforms were in effect a replica of 1962. While largely a failure and ending with countrywide protests from the madrasa network, some major decisions did come through. Zakat funds were channelled to madrasas and their degrees were given a formal legal recognition conditional upon inclusion of secular subjects (Rahman, 2004). Whether this equivalence has been accepted practically is another matter.

Lessons from past reforms

There are two important lessons to be taken from these experiences. Firstly, participation of religious leaders is essential for any decisions, let alone large-scale reforms for madrasas to achieve success. The development discourse can take the

history of madrasa reforms in Pakistan as a classic example of the failure of non-participatory development projects.

This is not to say that the clergy had no role to play in these failures. While they established a reactionary umbrella organization, Malik (1996) asserts that they needed to be more authoritative. Indeed, while it is widely agreed that they too desire changes in the madrasa system, dismissal of State decisions was never followed by alternatives being suggested.

The second lesson is to recognize madrasas as parallel, though non-confrontational, institutions to mainstream education and just as in the latter, there is a range of quality. Hence they require innovative solutions to particular issues depending on numerous factors; one-size-fits-all reforms are bound to fail. Moreover, rather than perceiving madrasas as backward institutions for social welfare, as reformers tend to do, there needs to be a more nuanced approach, because as Hetland (2008) argues rather idealistically, all educational institutions need to modernize and learn from each other.

The first two attempts at madrasa reform were never implemented fully despite some achievements. By not collaborating with the clergy and looking at madrasas rather domineeringly, State reforms were rebutted by the religious community, which by this time had become a dominant civil society representing not just the madrasas, but also many religious-minded people who look at an encroachment of external actors on religious institutions as an encroachment on religion as well.

September 2001 and beyond

The politics attached to previous reforms were miniscule compared to those in 2001 and beyond. Interestingly, the intent and planning was already in place pre-9/11, but with a strategic alliance in war coupled with aid packages, these were moulded to suit the new pressurized environment. Yet, even in the new reforms, while the intent remained critically political and the measures even more so, policies maintained the need to secularize education in madrasas.

One's contention is not so much that madrasa students should not study modern subjects – there has been enough evidence to suggest that they should. But the social and religious functions performed by the larger madrasas are the result of a well rounded education that centres on religion. Hence, modern subjects are not altogether absent from the curriculum, which does not need a complete restructuring given the outcomes that it is supposed to lead to. But, for many madrasas, as Ahmad (2004) has contended, the facilities are simply not enough to provide the Dars-e-Nizamiya in the first place. Therefore, as a necessary first step, quality education in the non-madrasa arena needs to be made available to those who desire it so that the natural evolution of a system can start. And then some State-madrasa partnership can be used to comprehensively deal with the curriculum situation.

One advocated policy is to include English as a necessary language in the national curriculum (Kronstadt, 2004). Madrasas remain no exception. But it has to be wondered; for all its usefulness on a global stage, for someone who desires to teach Islam to the masses in a country like Pakistan, would investment in English be wasted? Many questions ensue and there is probably no adequate answer. That being said, it is part of the curriculum in the larger madrasas and since that is the case, one's argument that the entire madrasa system can be compared to the overall educational system of Pakistan is strengthened further.

The latest reforms were based on two separate ordinances before and after September 2001. Candland (2005) assesses the first ordinance as having two effects of creating 'model' madrasas and establishing a Pakistan Madrasa Education Board (PMEB) under which madrasas would register voluntarily, in what was "an enabling" approach. On the other hand, the post-9/11 ordinance took a controlling approach by demanding declaration of finances and, initially, also of registration.

The impact of the model madrasas has been limited at best. Optimism regarding opportunities for students have given way to widespread scepticism or even criticism. Just three were built in the country – two for boys and one for girls – and since they combine to teach around 300 students (Iqbal, 2003), they are somewhat ridiculed by the larger madrasas which cater to thousands of students each. They have additionally had a troubled start with continuous administrative, curriculum-related and infrastructural issues and have been exceedingly slow to respond to critics (Candland, 2005).

Rahman (2004) further questions the relevance of model madrasas by noting that since all registered madrasas, in order to avail State funding, are supposed to teach secular subjects, there remains little difference between a regular madrasa and a model madrasa apart from the fact that the latter is State-sponsored. And that in effect becomes a moot point since madrasas are proudly autonomous.

Creating model madrasas is not a bad idea in itself as that would in the long run be a good experiment to provide hybrid education that involves modern studies grounded in Islamic sciences. Such an institution, if democratically run, would find numerous admirers in Pakistan. But, by building new schools for existing madrasas to follow when there is already active resistance and mistrust by the very people it is hoping to attract, it makes a seemingly good policy look exceedingly poor.

The second aspect of the reforms is related to terrorism. That involved madrasa registration, the banning of some organizations, and the more controversial if not outright unnecessary deportation of foreign students studying in madrasas (Rahman, 2004). As opposed to the intent before 9/11, these measures confirmed the notion of an interventionist State although the entire ethos remained largely dictated by polemics of integration of madrasas into mainstream education by adding modern subjects and conditional funding. The obvious contradiction was that even though registration was demanded and given a deadline, it remained voluntary. Needless to say, madrasas felt no need to give up autonomy and the militant ones would not have done so in any case (Riaz, 2008).

Essentially, the politics of the reforms overlooked the fact that while madrasas do need support and change, terrorism is not the only issue in question. The curriculum needs to be changed not to promote secularization but rather to remove hate literature and bring in supplementary texts. In fact, Candland (2005) argues that subjects being taught in government schools are already replete with sectarian and biased views; adding them to madrasas is surely counter-productive. Moreover, when madrasa reformation takes place with the intention of producing students who are prepared for employment in a sector other than the religious sector, they miss the entire point of a madrasa education, which was in the first place meant to produce religious scholars.

All in all, as Ahmed and Stroehlein (2005) note,

“...promises came to nothing. (The) military government never implemented any programme to register the madrasas, follow their financing or control their curricula. Although there are a few ‘model madrasas’ for Western media consumption, the extremist ones account for perhaps as many as 15 per cent of the religious schools in Pakistan and are free to churn out their radicalized graduates.”

Hence the latest reforms, aided generously by the USA, have largely failed to see madrasas as educational, social and religious institutions that have specific problems that need to be looked at. With no substantial participation from religious leaders, these have been criticized by and large by everyone attached to the madrasa and have only heightened the secularization and traditionalism tension that are not just emanating from the madrasa anymore.

Indeed, no comprehensive study regarding for instance the standard of life, of nutrition or transportation problems, health issues or even academic acumen of students has surfaced. Instead, numerous contrasting reports based on madrasa numbers, their links to terrorism and the sectarian texts they follow have been used for educational restructuring. Needless to say, the reform project has had to be closed down before it even became clear what exactly was expected to be achieved; funds have either been unused or wasted.

And this finally brings us to a third lesson from madrasa reform failures. Along with collaborative participation of the clergy and recognition of madrasas as diverse educational institutions comparable to and within the overall educational infrastructure, it is important for reformers, observers and academics alike to begin a process of depoliticizing the madrasa before beginning a process of reform. These three factors are essential for madrasas’ potential to be achieved. Whether economic, educational, social or religious, there are many existing and potential benefits that need to be derived from madrasas. More innovative methods to bring out the best in madrasas must be looked into so that relevant changes can be brought to the institution depending on its particular needs.

Recommendations

For such contextual measures, it is interesting to study models that are quite distinct and have certain aims. The following brief discussion provides innovative alternatives to large-scale madrasa reforms that could potentially lead to benefits at much lower costs.

Our contention is that if there are to be model madrasas, they need to be recognized from already established and reputed institutions. Larger, respected madrasas from Lahore and Karachi, for instance, complete with English-language websites, comprehensive syllabi, reputed teachers, secular and traditional subjects, a large and international student body, boarding facilities and opportunities for a range of ages and occupations, can be model universities not just for madrasas but also for many other institutions. Technologically progressive and coming up with part-time programmes to non-madrasa students as well as covering computer literacy, the objectives of these madrasas remain the same: to produce Islamic scholars who are able to understand modern-day complexities and be community leaders, academics and professionals in both religious and secular environments in order to further the cause of an Islamic society.

Even more influential and beneficial for the sake of madrasa progress if such is the aim of a madrasa-trained graduate, then we would further the case for a State-madrasa partnership based on the principles of the Cambridge Muslim College. Led by the prominent Muslim scholar Abdal Hakim Murad, this institution offers a 'crash course' in diverse fields ranging from politics to health and from comparative religions to effective communication skills. The difference from other regular institutions is that it only caters to graduates from institutions of Islamic learning (details can be found on www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org).

With the multicultural diversity in Britain, madrasa graduates from Pakistan, for instance, settled in the UK need to be well-informed on not just religion but a variety of issues that are equally important. If Islam is a way of social life however, these individuals need multi-faceted education grounded in Islamic principles and that too within the spectrum of British society. The idea is that as these people lead the Muslim communities in Britain, they need to be able to understand the nuances of a particular community and the specific problems that it faces, some aspects of which might be completely irrelevant to another country.

In the case of Pakistan though, this perhaps offers the best avenue for the beginning of an effective State-madrasa partnership. Removed from the politics of reforms and

curriculum change, such an initiative could engage academics and professionals from a variety of fields to impart relevant skills and tools to madrasa graduates so they can fulfil community duties more effectively and perhaps even be able to enjoy more lucrative employment opportunities. Our impression is that such an arrangement could be beneficial to all parties concerned but again only if it takes into account the clergy's participation within a depoliticized reform process.

If a madrasa graduate who is trained in Islamic sciences has to be an effective community leader in his position as a teacher or an imam of a mosque, there is only so much that extensive training in mathematics for instance can help him with. However, equip him with knowledge and practical training on say, safety issues, religious tolerance, health, domestic violence and that could actually be an endeavour worth a thousand reforms given his proximity to the community. This is where it is essential to understand the reason for Islamic education in the first place – a reform process stubbornly adding secular subjects for the sake of adding secular subjects may even succeed in being able to do so. But the ends to be achieved through such thinking remain unfulfilled. And for the average Pakistani community where social problems need community-based endeavours, the local mosque with an educated imam could be a vital agent of progress.

There are other countries as well where madrasas have been part of reforms that are worth looking into. Bangladesh has a parallel setup of madrasas established and financed by the State, but largely run by the clergy. These are for higher learning and comparable to the larger madrasas in Pakistan. Their degrees are in high demand and lead to suitable economic ends as graduates end up teaching and in other professional arenas (Ahmad 2006). Surely though, the sociological process for accepting madrasa degrees, regardless of their legal status as equivalent, is far from complete in Pakistan.

There are also programmes functional in Pakistan outside of the realm of madrasa boards. The Salaam Project, for instance, endorsed by educationalists and the clergy, is seen by its inceptor as a reform from within the religious community. This grassroots initiative combines religious knowledge with social values as part of the curriculum and operates as a private school but shares its ideology with madrasas (Stonehill, 2006). Tavernise (2008) also extols the efforts of Turkish schools in Pakistan that are largely following a Western curriculum but also offer quality religious education. Catering to the elite, they also show that the desire for Islamic knowledge is not subject to socio-economic class per se.

The most effective large-scale work done however is perhaps by the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD). As Cataldi et al. (2008) examine, its work with over a thousand madrasa administrators and teachers has led to trainings in human rights, religious tolerance and secular subjects, which the trained madrasa teachers subsequently use to coach colleagues in other madrasas. This Madrasa Enhancement Project, we would argue, is working primarily because it has established a relationship of trust and gives the impetus to the madrasas themselves. The clergy's participation is not just important, it is central to the success of the ICRD.

There are numerous options that can be taken up, but large-scale reforms, especially those dictated by the State, are not just irrelevant to the entire purpose of madrasa education, they also come with the risk of exacerbating the already tense relationships. What is desired is State-madrasa engagement of the sort examined for instance in the case of emulating the Cambridge Muslim College. Along the lines of Hulme (2004), this is exactly the sort of social policy needed for madrasas; as on the one hand it 'thinks big' as per the results expected, while also 'thinking little' so as not to destroy an institution that is essential for Pakistani society.

Conclusion

The madrasa situation remains as complicated as always. Current reforms have been accompanied by massive funding from primarily the USA, but money alone is not the issue. Religion as a way of development is perhaps more conscious of its identity, and when external actors are involved, there is an inherent mistrust. It is this recognition that has, for instance, caused Curtis (2007) to recommend that external funders need to stay away from broad madrasa reforms and accept their usefulness not just in education but also in the social life of Pakistan.

There is unanimity of view in the need for educational reforms as a whole, of which madrasas are a part. In their case, the contentious issue becomes the role of the clergy. They need to be active participants, even leading the reform process because rightly or wrongly, they have garnered public respect and been able to continue a scholarly tradition with little help from outside. Hence, whether madrasa reform is looking at management, terrorism, curriculum, desired outcomes or finances - and all of these are important areas - the clergy need to be at the front of the decision making process, not just because that gives legitimacy but because then it also becomes an internally guided route towards relevant change.

Malik (1996), Iqbal (2009) and others remain adamant that madrasa reform has to be brought about by the clergy; interestingly, Riaz (2008) cautions against letting any one group control the meaning and path of religious development. Candland (2005) and Bano (2007b) steer clear of power dynamics and urge State-clergy engagement. Without such a shift, the issue of external aid, for instance, is not likely to be understood in its entirety. Current reforms have used foreign aid, but as Fair (2007) argues, most Pakistanis feel that there are ulterior motives of de-Islamization behind such aid, and so other systems of financing, such as zakat funds, should be relied upon.

Our analysis of madrasas has tried to differentiate between their social, educational and religious diversity as well as their desired outcomes. As such then, generic reforms cannot realistically be implemented or even thoughtfully planned. Two things are for sure – the respect that people have for the madrasa despite recent negativities due to terrorism and militia, and secondly, the persistence of an institution that perplexes policy makers due to its informality. The fact is that excessive and unnecessary conflicts can cause significant disarray in society if they damage such an institution that is part of an established network of civil societies and one that is handling a certain degree of social and educational, and almost all the religious burden, of the country.

By all means, terrorism has to be tackled. And if madrasas are part of the problem, then they also have to be recognized as part of the solution. It is as Cataldi et al. (2008) claim – fight bad theology with good theology. Hence, only when innovative policies are designed for specific problems of madrasas, will their potential be truly realized. For that, it is necessary to place them within the educational system of the country and regard them as an alternative, but not necessarily retrograde, institution. Even with regard to the economic ends of education, comparisons have to be made between madrasa graduates who have gone through the entire course and college graduates, as well as understanding that a government school drop-out is likely to be in a similar situation to a madrasa student whose only ability has been memorization of the Quran. In the latter case though, he is still likely to avail certain economic opportunities and simple as it may be, earn a living.

Our contention is that madrasa graduates, being essentially community leaders that people look up to for religious if not moral guidance, can provide much needed services if their academic and practical knowledge is enhanced. That does not necessarily and not even ideally mean that their curriculum needs to be secularized. In present circumstances, postgraduate public-private endeavour based on the principles of the Cambridge Muslim College does offer a meaningful path to madrasa reform. Placing the

madrasa in parallel to mainstream education does not mean that both have to be the same. It simply implies that for their respective ends, corresponding means have to be supplied. As Iqbal (2009) states:

“For centuries, the essential function of the madrasa has been to produce a certain kind of person. In the present context, the madrasa-trained person has to be different from a university-educated person, for the university and the madrasa are two different and distinct institutions. A twenty-first century madressah cannot be another modern university; it has to be rooted in its own tradition and yet function in the modern world.”

For it to function effectively though, it has first to consciously be depoliticized both in practice and in theory. Secondly, it requires an analysis of madrasas as educational institutions and to be treated as such. Finally, the clergy have to be given leading roles in collaborative decision making and implementation of any process. Otherwise, the focus on terrorism that has threatened to overwhelm the social, educational and religious potentials of madrasas might eventually lead to disintegration of an enviable traditional institution. We believe that is something that neither the State nor the clergy desire, and could lead to significant social breakdown, given the unique linkages that madrasas have established with the societies that they are components of.

Notes & References

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