

Madrasa Education in Pakistan: In the Context of Government Policy

Abstract: The word 'madrasa' do generate a lot of curiosity and negative propaganda among scholars of international community. In most of the instances it is considered to be an institution of preaching hatred and violence. Moreover, the madrasas existing in Pakistan are considered to be factories producing religious extremists. But, strangely enough, the basic reason behind the emergence of madrasa- to seek knowledge as enshrined in the principals of Islam are not known. Therefore, fundamental objective or purpose of the study is to understand the changing pattern of madrasa and the role of government in Pakistan to 'modernise' it. The paper is also trying to understand the socio-political context of Pakistan under which the madrasas are operating. The study has been based on the research experience of the writer who has extensively studied the Madrasa Literature of Pakistan while writing her Doctoral thesis. The few core findings of the paper are the fact that over a considerable period of time, madrasas have evolved from an all encompassing educational institution to a centre of religious knowledge; the society of Pakistan to some extent has been segmented into western educated 'modern and fortunate' people versus madrasa educated 'traditional and less-fortunate' mass. Moreover, post 9/11, Pakistani Government did try to 'reform' the madrasa system but could not achieve much success due to shallow approach and non-compliance of various madrasa establishments.

Keywords: Madrasa, Pakistan, Reform Education, 9/11, Islam.



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The Madrasa tradition has been established and it is prevailing since the time of Prophet Muhammad. But, unfortunately, tragedy attached with it is the fact that, madrasa is still covered in misery and mystery. Not much effort has been generated to understand the true nature of madrasa, and the reasons for its continued existence. The examination of the status of madrasa in Islamic history testimonies to its success due to strong sense of respect among the Muslims for 'Knowledge'- Ilm as dictated by the Prophet. The madrasas can be considered as the carrier of knowledge. But, unfortunately, post 9/11; the institution suddenly cropt out of ages of oblivion and was faced with series of hatred and phobia. There is no denying the fact that, madrasa recieved un-due curiosity and imagination of international audience. However, most of contemporary political scholars are not aware of the fact that in the initial days of Islam, the aim of madrasa was preservation and spread of knowledge- a role that has somehow lost its efficacy over a long period of time. The sudden and tragic incident of 9/11 along with involvement of al-Qaeda and Taliban changed the status of madrasa for ever. The position of madrasas from simple schools for education changed into breeding grounds of Islamist fundamentalist.

The nuance of madrasa has kept changing through the ages. The genesis of this word can be traced back in the classical Hebrew. Generally, it is believed that the word 'madrasa' has been derived from an Arabic infinitive 'Dars' meaning 'to study' and madrasa being an adverb of place, carries the meaning of, place of studies or the place of learning; however there were places in the pre-Islamic Arabic known to the Jews called 'Midrash'. Midrash is said to have been derived from its Hebrew or Arabic root word 'DARSH' thus, the concept of madrasa in its present meaning is not necessarily an Islamic concept rather it may be borrowed from Jewish, the most ancient Semitic religion (Alam, 2001).

One can very well state that there has been a deviation in the nature and character of madrasa over a considerable period of time. During the early days of Islam, madrasas were considered an institution of knowledge both religious and secular. It was the regular area of debate and subjects like astronomy, architecture, physics, literature, politics etc were frequently discussed among the scholars and teachers. But, unfortunately, over a period of time, madrasa did evolve as only a place of religious learning. A stark shift that did have overbearing impact on the contemporary Pakistani education institutions.

In the context of Pakistan, one can say that, the story of it's politics since inception is one of a blatant pursuit of political self-interests by Pakistani ruling elites disguised in terms of religious discourse. The strategy of the governing classes (over the years) was to proclaim

Pakistan an Ideological State based on Islam and not a democracy (Ahmad, 2000). In a country like Pakistan, the element of Islam has a direct impact in shaping the madrasa structure. Islamisation can be simply defined as a process in which ‘religion’ becomes encompassing and supreme force. Islamisation entails a process of legislative, executive and legal actions through which individuals spend their lives in accordance to the teachings of Islam and take it as a ‘code of life’ (Aslam, 2003). Islamisation has become more or less synonymous with the politics of regime survival in Pakistan.

The correlation between Islamisation and madrasa education lies in the fact that they complement as well as supplement each other. Religion being the key aspect of Pakistan’s cultural heritage and identity, the educational system (of which madrasa is a constituent unit) carry the responsibility to expand and strengthen the heritage (Kumar, 2007). Islamisation can be considered one of the reasons behind the proliferation of the madrasas in Pakistan. And at the same time, madrasa as an independent unit adds to the progression of Islamisation through its ideology and followers.

Interestingly, madrasa since time of its emergence has been intrinsically related with state activities, policies and patronage. In the formative period of Islam, madrasas acted as supporters of the Islamdom and played decisive role in aiding the administrative machinery. Therefore, the two entities: madrasas and state have shared common history through ages. Even in the Indian Sub-continent, Muslim rulers established madrasas and also devised new teaching methods, curriculum and educational policies. Before, 1947 with the single existence of India, madrasas played important role in the social structure of the country.

Being part of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Pakistan has low education indicators. In the report of 2013, the rank for Pakistan is 146 (UNDP, 2013). In case of Pakistan, the lack of proper educational institutions funded and managed by state as an alternative in rural areas has also intensified popularity of madrasas in society. Besides, the existence of ‘Ghost schools’ predominantly in the rural areas of Pakistan have also deteriorated the education system of the country. According to the malpractice, schools are registered under the government but, in reality the school building acts as cow-shed or a dilapidated building without a glimpse of regular class-rooms, students or teachers.

The normal trend in Pakistan is high drop-out rate at every crucial educational stage. Some quit formal education after reaching 5th grade in school. Another section leaves school at 10th grade. And the process continues till the college level. The economic factor also

contributes a lot in this phenomenon. Students are more inclined towards earning a living for their family rather than acquiring formal education. In Pakistan, progress of educational indicators have been hampered by a range of issues like negligible budgetary allocations to education, low literacy and enrolment rates, significantly high dropout rates, and acute regional and gender inequalities (Shaikh, 2006). Compounding the situation are issues of disparity in access and participation ‘by social class (the rich versus the poor), are of residence (rural versus urban) and gender’ (Zia, 2003). The state itself is the product of such divisive structure as the people involved in politics are from elite and affluent families, not interested or even familiar with actual problems. They do not belong to the deprived lot, therefore are indifferent towards basic requirements.

As is very evident that since 9/11, madrasa education has been at the vortex of international studies, we shall study the policies as promulgated by the regime of Pervez Musharraf. The approach of the State under Pervez Musharraf saw extensive elaboration of madrasa policy and a shift from Islamisation to Modernisation of the institution. In June 2000, the Pakistani government tried to register every madrasa. Only 4350, about one tenth, agreed to be registered and the rest simply ignored the statute. There was no incentive to register and no punishment if one did not (Singer, 2001).

However, in August 2001, Government created a Pakistan Madrasa Education Board (PMEB) to establish a network of “model madrasas” and regulate others, promulgated under the Pakistan Madrasa Education Board Ordinance, 2001 (Kronstadt, 2004). The PMEB’s mandate was to establish model madrasas and to regulate and approve conditions of existing seminaries on the recommendations of its Academic Council. The PMEB was to grant affiliations to existing madrasas in the private sector also. This affiliation does not require registration but was instead an effort to encourage madrasas to provide both religious and secular education’ (ICG Asia Report, 2004). The PMEB’s significant achievement so far has been the establishment of three model madrasas, one each in Karachi and Sukkur in Sindh Province and in the federal capital, Islamabad.

The Education Sector Reform Action Plan was embarked by Musharraf Government. The National Commission for Human Development (NCHD) which took over responsibility for education was also supported by the Government (Commission on Human Rights, 2006). Special attention was paid within key policy formulations, particularly the Education Sector Reforms (ESR) to the reformation of madrasas among the stated ESR goals is bringing

madrassa curriculum into the mainstream of Pakistan's general education system through the inclusion of "secular" subjects such as science (Kronstadt, 2004).

However, some madrasas do resist registration in favour of more autonomy. In its first Annual report October 2002, the PMEAB noted: 'Misunderstandings about the objectives of the Board have resulted in non-cooperation of the heads of madrasas (Government of Pakistan 2002). In 2002, Government in Pakistan promised to reform madrasas by cracking down on ones that preach violence, pushing the remaining ones towards moderation and integrating them into the public school system. Musharraf thus announced an initiative, the Deeni Madaris Ordinance (Voluntary Registration and Regulation) of 2002.

Through the Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance 2002, the state promised funding to madrasas that formally registered with the government. In a more controversial step, the Pakistani state demanded that madrasas expel all foreign students by December 31, 2005. Islamist groups vehemently resisted government's efforts, and authorities backed down and made public statements indicating that they would not use force or shut down noncompliant madrasas to enforce the directives (Blanchard, 2006). The limitation of these Ordinances lies in poorly designed administrative structure, rather than the stubborn attitude of Ulema (Candland, 2008). The popular mandate is very hard to achieve due to international events and the death of hundreds of Muslims in Afghanistan. The sentiment of common people as anti-US and lack of Government credibility caused such failure.

A Madrasa Reform Project (MRP) has been launched and an amount of Rs. 225 million has been allocated in the Public Sector Development Programme (PSPD) 2002-2003 for this purpose. With the aim of establishing and strengthening lines of communication between madrasas and the state, it was to educate 1.5 million students, both male and female, and will enable them to continue their studies in colleges and universities (Sareen, 2005). The main objective of the reform is to introduce formal subjects like English, Mathematics, Pakistan Studies, Social Studies and General Science at the primary and secondary levels. At the intermediate level, English, Economics, Pakistan Studies and Computer Science were to be taught.

The government proposed a new education policy in September 2009, and a decision was made to establish a Madrassa Regulatory Authority under the Interior Ministry to control madrasas. However, the Ittehad Tanzeemat-e-Madaaris Pakistan (ITMP) rejected the proposal to work under the Interior Ministry, and suggested setting up the authority under Ministry of

Religious Affairs or Education instead. In October 2010, the government succeeded inking an agreement with ITMP for the introduction of contemporary subjects in seminaries in their metric and intermediate courses. However, the issue of madrasa reforms has become more complex after the promulgation of 18th Amendment, under which the subject of Islamic education has been transferred to the provinces (Zaidi, 2013).

Despite all the efforts so far have been made by the governments, the issue could not be resolved. There is a state of mistrust between the government and the madrasa establishment. Government offered financial and technical assistance to madrasas for their better role in society (Butt, 2012).

While discussing the madrasa education, we tend to forget a very essential element of the system. Madrasas have proved themselves in the test of time. For centuries they are imparting education. One should not neglect the fact that some innate features must be indigenously good within the system, otherwise it would have perished long ago. But, tragic enough, the initial motive behind madrasa formation has seen an adverse tilt. Madrasas can no more be associated with only "education", as they now impart special attention to "religious education", in most of the cases. Therefore, it becomes very important to analyse the impact of madrasa education on the society and polity.

In Pakistan also, the madrasas do not have a unified structure, as they are divided on the basis of sects. For the Sunnis, the majority sect in Pakistan, madrasas are divided among Deobandis, Barelwis and Ahl-e-Hadith sub-sects. The Shia madrasas also follow their own point of view like the Sunnis. Deobandis are concentrated in the Pashtun belt from north Punjab to NWFP (KP), northern Baluchistan, urban Punjab and Sindh, Barelwis are concentrated in rural Punjab and Sindh with predominance of saint and shrine culture, the Ahl-e-Hadith are also located in Punjab and the Shias are inhabited in Karachi, Southern Punjab and northern areas of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) (Bedi, 2006).

One of the major outcomes of madrasa education in Pakistan has been the spillover effect in the neighbouring countries. Pakistan as we know is surrounded by Afghanistan and Iran. The end of 1970s saw emergence of revivalist Shia Islam in Iran, with the rise of Khomeini and at the same time the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan called for the need of religious fighter to cast away the atheist Soviet force. The establishment of religious theocracy in Iran caused proliferation of Shia madrasas in Pakistan. The war in Afghanistan required huge number of religiously motivated soldiers- religiously educated and trained by Pakistan's

Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) with guidance from many madrasas of the region. The Afghan refugee factor was also very dominant in Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. The year 2001 experienced over 3.6 million refugees from Afghanistan establishing camps across Pakistan border. Pakistan organised network of Islamist parties run several programs in refugee camps related with health, social and educational services. And as a result, madrasas flourished in such environment as the state was unable to provide alternatives and radical forces took the chance (Nolan, 2006). Most of the volunteers of Afghan Jihad are Afghans, and some Pakistani citizens as well, who originated from the NWFP (KP), Balochistan and also from Sindh and Punjab (Dorransoro, 2000). The main activities of madrasas have over the years shifted from the Afghanistan border areas to southern and rural Punjab. The active role played by organisations like Jami'at-e-Ulema-e Islam (JUI) and Jama'at-e-Islami (JI) in the context of linking madrasas with Afghan cause is commendable. The tribal dominated region of Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), along the Afghanistan border proved to be the breeding grounds for Mujahideen trained in hundreds of seminaries, under the supervision of ISI instructors. The seminaries catered to Afghan refugees and recruits in the war against the communist forces in Afghanistan (Gul, 2009). The Soviet invasion caused proliferation of Deobandi madrasas in the border areas. The madrasas have been considered as Neo-fundamentalist groups, active in Pakistan and Afghanistan since 1980s which gave birth to the radicalisation of the conservative religious forces of Taliban. Their main aim is imposition of Shariyat and aggravation of Jihad in the name of religion (Roy, 2002).

The madrasa have a strong following among the less fortunate section of both rural and urban Pakistan. With the spread of radical Islam into the hinterland of the country the madrasas have started to behave like a centre of power and politics. Therefore, the construction of madrasas generally receive more funds and donation in comparison to schools. On the other hand, the so-called educated section of Pakistan with cadet, public and missionary school upbringings do not want to get associated with madrasas.

The madrasa students are not open towards the western educated people, as they are considered forerunners of un-Islamic thoughts and morally delinquent. Therefore, they start refuting the western concepts of capitalism, socialism, liberty, economic ideas and individualism and consider these concepts to be disruptive on the muslim society (Rahman, 2008). Most madrasas do not teach secular subjects. Religious leaders who decide the curriculum contend that every aspect of knowledge that a Muslim needs to know has been revealed to the Prophet and is contained in Qura'an. Given this resistance to secular knowledge, most religious schools are not designed to prepare students for employment (USAID, 2004).

The religious and emotion concept of sawab or getting 'reward' for good deeds is very well attached with the concept of charity vis-a-vis madrasa. People with enormous amount of landed property and good fortune often sponsor the madrasas in lieu of a getting reward and blessings of the God and also for a better after-life.

The cause and effect of the above mentioned points, have given scope and reason to the international community for demonising Islam. The conflicting and divisive role played by madrasas in Pakistan has given a chance to the international community to brand Islam as a violent religion and madrasas as the institution preaching that version. The international position of Pakistan has been severely questioned with the rise of Taliban and Al-Qaeda and their alleged link with the madrasa setup. There is no denying the fact that madrasa education produce religious, sectarian, sub-sectarian and anti-west bias, but it cannot be justified that such bias are translated into militancy and other forms of violence, as considered by the international community. In the eyes of western politicians, a certain type of education based on exclusive and rote learning of the Qura'an offered by madrasas, seem to be the only logical explanation for the inculcation of hate and irrationality in Islamist terrorists (Bergen and Pandey, 2006). The linking of Islamic education with militant activities against the West has resulted in the propagation of simplistic notions of Islam as a monolithic, ideological and violent faith (Saikh, 2006). And at the same time, not just madrasa students, but people from secular institutions also respond to political Islam. Most of those indulging in suicide bombing and actual fighting against non-Muslims are young, radical and angry people belonging to secular institutions of learning, who are majorly anti-West due to neo-colonial and exploitative policies (Rahman, 2008). There is a fundamental distinction between madrasa graduates who are from poor economic background, possessing little technological knowledge and lead a downplayed pious life in villages and the middle class, politically literate global Jihadis (Bedi, 2006). The second section uses its own western exposure and upbringing to negate the modern lifestyle and cause subsequent havoc in forms of terrorist attacks and other activities. An important aspect which is never discussed in international arena.

Pakistan has been experiencing 'a wave of madrasa reform' post 9/11. But, unfortunately, most of these are a political 'eyewash', as the government has failed miserably to regulate and streamline the madrasa education. One of the major lacunae of the study has been the inability to estimate the total number of madrasas both registered and un-registered in Pakistan. Although, the government has been encouraging to register the madrasa, but sense of curricular autonomy and superiority are the major impediments towards rational development of the institution.

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