



In this Issue

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ANOTHER APPROACH TO MADRASSA REFORMS IN PAKISTAN

Preamble

The rise of extremism and intolerance in Pakistan over the decades, not just in the militant periphery but in mainstream society too, has been promoted by a number of factors. A critical one among them is the system of education in the country – several studies, including the Jinnah Institute’s policy brief ‘*The Continuing Biases in Our Textbooks*’, (April 30, 2012) have shown how the textbooks developed by the public sector are inculcating a parochial and narrow outlook in students. Jinnah Institute’s brief made several recommendations to curb this worrying trend, including effective reform of the madrassa (religious seminary) system. While a small percentage of students enrolled in Pakistani schools attend madrassas, their socio-political impact is disproportionately high given that some of them are churning out graduates that take up arms against other sects, minorities and the state.

This paper will expand on the recommendation for madrassa reform, looking at the ways in which this can be achieved, and making the case for undertaking such measures in Pakistan.. It will first survey recent attempts at madrassa reforms, which unsuccessfully relied on the use of contested administrative and financial regulation measures, or else tried to include secular education in madrassa syllabi. The paper argues for a more innovative, curriculum-based approach, relying on Islamic knowledge itself to infuse more tolerance within madrassa teachers and students.

Background

Several countries with large Muslim populations, including Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Pakistan, have been trying to reform their religious seminaries by introducing modern subjects with varying degrees of success. Given Pakistan's proximity to conflict-ridden Afghanistan, and the fact that many senior Taliban leaders are the products of madrassas in Pakistan, focusing on madrassa reforms in Pakistan is particularly important. Not all madrassas in the country overtly promote militancy. Many, however, have a sectarian outlook, and their students are often trained to counter rival sects with fierce polemic. This is partly responsible for sectarian strife and violence in Pakistan (Winthrop and Graff, 2010)

Although madrassa education has a long and important history in the context of promoting education in South Asia, secular schools began replacing madrassas as Britain colonized India, and in the period following Partition in 1947. It was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 that led to a spike in funding for madrassas in Pakistan and supplied a steady stream of ideologically-motivated students for the US-backed insurgency across the border. US and Pakistani use of madrassa students in the proxy war in Afghanistan, promoting them as mujahideen, holy warriors fighting in the name of Islam, led to a disturbing trend of growing militancy in such schools. This has become a major problem both for the international community and for Pakistan today.

According to research conducted by the World Bank, the current number of madrassas is small compared to Pakistan's public and private schools, accounting for less than 200,000 full-time students, or less than one percent of all students enrolled across Pakistan. (Andrabi et al, 2010) The International Crisis Group factors in students that attend madrassas in the evenings, and estimates enrolment to be close to 1.5 million. (ICG, 2002)

It is interesting to note that madrassas vary in their ideological character and the education they impart, from neighborhood evening religious schools to those incorporating a more radical or militant viewpoint. Yet none of the existing data sources distinguish between types of madrassas.

Nonetheless, with rising militancy and extremist violence, Pakistan's government has been struggling to bring madrassas under its control. Emphasis was also placed on the need for them to begin teaching mainstream subjects like mathematics, science and social studies in accordance with the syllabus prescribed by the government. (Shah, 2006) Yet attempts to register and scrutinize madrassa finances are met with ongoing resistance.

At the end of 2011, Pakistan's Ministry of Interior concluded yet another agreement with the Ittihad-i-Tanzeemat-i-Madaris Pakistan (ITMP), a coalition of five major madrassa boards, granting them independence in designing the religious curriculum. This agreement, however, did not clarify exactly what the religious curriculum for madrassas would encompass. This is worrying since the inclusion of modern subjects alone is not sufficient to prevent intolerance, given that even secular textbooks in Pakistan are criticized for being biased against other religions (Hinduism in particular), especially if madrassas continue to propound myopic worldviews. (Hoodbhoy, 1998)

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It seems that the more coercive attempts at external scrutiny of madrassas, be it through government or donor agencies, will only be met with suspicion by madrassa teachers and administrators, and will continue to yield disappointing results. There has not been sufficient acknowledgement of the fact that it is not the international donor community but Muslim intellectuals themselves who need to seriously look into these issues and try to promote reform and serious research through madrassa education. The Muslim world has produced sufficient work in Islamic subjects, which is acceptable to different schools of thought, which could be creatively infused into the existing religious curriculum to expand the worldview of madrassa students.

Based on the experience emerging from educational innovations around the world, it is clear that curriculum and pedagogical improvements are effective means to ensure that dialogue and understanding replace polemics among madrassa graduates. Yet, efforts to help promote a culture of tolerance within madrassas, by engaging constructively with their existing syllabus and teaching staff have not received required attention in Pakistan.

It is however imperative to pay more attention to the existing religious curriculum and the quality of teaching within madrassas to encourage critical thinking rather than rote learning. Although madrassas do admittedly need a multi-tiered accountability system to ensure that extremist ideologies are not being inculcated, it is vital to engage with religious scholars and other stakeholders to ensure that the desired reform objectives are met, instead of relying on the administrative scrutiny of the government alone. This is what the background research in this paper has aimed to do.

Aim of the paper and methodological approach

Premised on the idea that focusing on what madrassas are teaching is vital to infusing more tolerance within these institutions, this paper specifically aims to draw attention to issues related to reforming the existing religious curriculum of madrassas, and situating this imperative within the broader context of ongoing madrassa reforms in Pakistan.

Besides secondary research, the findings of this paper are based on two dozen semi-structured interviews conducted with Islamic scholars, educationists and socio-cultural analysts. Heads and teachers at madrassas in Lahore and Gujrat, and faculty members of the International Islamic University in Islamabad, were also interviewed.

How madrassa education is organized

Several boards, or *wafaqs*, represent a majority of madrassas in the country, belonging to both Sunni and Shia schools of thought. These wafaqs continue to maintain their separate status, due to divergences on various sectarian issues, but they have formed a common platform, the Ittehad-e-Tanzeemat-e-Madaris Pakistan (ITMP), which has been negotiating with the government on madrassa reforms. These wafaqs are: the Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia, the Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Alhe Sunnat, the Jamia Naeemia, the Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Salfia, the Wafaq-ul-Madaris Shia, Jamia-al-Muntazar and the Rabita-ul-Madaris Al Islamia.

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Besides these, there are also independent institutions, which have their own madrassas. The most prominent of which are the Jamia Islamia Minhaj-ul-Quran, Jamia Taleemat-e-Islamia, Jamia Ashrafia, Dar-ul-Uloom and Darul-ul-uloom Mohammadia Ghousia. These independent institutions are also recognized by the government and tend to have linkages with the above-mentioned wafaqs, following the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum. Besides curriculum guidance, all these entities also provide varying levels of additional support, such as prescribing supplementary materials to reinforce their particular interpretation of Islam, and emphasize the work of scholars recognized by their respective schools of thought. Before identifying potential opportunities for reform interventions, it is important to take a closer look at madrassa curricula.

Most prominent madrassas affiliated with the major waqafs in Pakistan follow a curriculum called 'Dars-e-Nizami', named after the Indian curriculum expert Maulana Nizamuddin Sehaldi (d. 1747 AD). In the earlier stages of madrassa education, the emphasis is on the recitation and memorization of the Quran. However, induction into the Dars-e-Nizami occurs after Class 8, provided a child has memorized the Quran already, or else after getting the Higher Secondary Certificate (a public school degree equivalent to Grade 10).

The stated purpose of the Dars-e-Nizami is to introduce a blend of Islamic teachings with social/natural sciences so that the subsequent graduates can enter a range of professions, and become lawyers, judges and administrators of the state. Based on this broader goal, the curriculum comprises 54 subjects to be covered over a period of eight years, and includes Arabic grammar and literature, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the Hadith (sayings of the Holy Prophet PBUH), and interpretation of the Quran. (Islam, 2010)

The Dars-e-Nizami has been modified over time.. While canonical texts are still used as a for continuity, more modern books are now used instead for some subjects. Arabic, for instance, is taught through modern and more accessible texts. (Ibid) However, subjects like history, the comparative study of religions, social sciences, politics, international affairs, economics or business studies (even from an Islamic perspective) are not included.

Besides adhering to the Dars-e-Nizami, madrassas from different schools of thought also prescribe supplemental materials. For instance, the syllabus (dated 2002) of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the oldest and most prominent Islamist political party in the country, mentions additional books by party founder Maulana Abul-Ala Maududi and other Jamaat intellectuals on a number of subjects, including Hadith. No madrassa teacher or administrator will readily confess to teaching any text which refutes the beliefs of other sects. However, despite the denials, the printed syllabi of many sects refute the beliefs of other sects, often rather harshly. On the other hand, some positive examples were also identified. The Quran Academy, for instance, denounces sectarianism (within the Sunni schools of thought at least) and has hired Ahle Hadith and Barelvi mosque leaders and teachers in their own school and mosques to offset such differences.

Academic activities in madrassas tend to revolve round the teacher-centred lecture method instead of more interactive learning methods. The indoctrination of younger children also takes place informally (since they are not yet following the Dars-e-Nizami), primarily through interaction with madrassa teachers. Many madrassa officials and administrators have ties to religious political parties in Pakistan,

which influence their personal ideological positions and that of their madrassas.. Several madrassas seem to encourage their students to participate in political protests, lectures and sermons. This exposure is beyond the in-class instruction provided in the public school system, but the purpose of such exposure is exploitative when it pits students against authorities, or encourages them to agitate, since in the process, they become increasingly radical and violent.

Conversely, many madrassas and their students are also involved in a range of social welfare activities in their communities as well, albeit these activities are often not acknowledged or recognized by madrassa critics, nor are the efforts evidently being made to supplement these positive attributes within madrassa education.

Other realities concerning madrassas

Madrassas generally do not charge tuition fees. Some have a one-time admission charge, which does not exceed Rs. 400, or just over \$4. Madrassas therefore manage to attract students from low-income families. There are also other reasons why madrassas have evident appeal for parents of school-going aged children.

Madrassa officials, especially in major cities like Lahore, point out that not all their students belong to low-income families who have limited educational options. Many parents also attach greater prestige to Islamic education, which has given rise to new Islamic institutions seeking to combine mainstream subjects with Islamic education. The growth of fee-paying schools set up by Islamic institutions and wafaqs, like the Jamia Ashrafiya in Lahore and the Jamaat-e-Islami-affiliated Hira School System, support the notion that Islamic education is also a demand-side.

The resource mobilization in madrassas visited by the researcher varied. Some of them were getting financial assistance from the government – the Auqaf (religious) department – and others also mentioned getting foreign assistance. The Saudi government helps the Ahle Hadith seminaries and the Iranian government supports Shia ones. (Ali, 2009) While comprehensive data in this regard was not gathered, this external assistance presumably goes to a limited number of madrassas whereas many are run on charity (*zakat*/alms, *khairat*/charity, *atiat*/gifts, etc). The perpetual resource crunch often entails sub-standard food, boarding and lodging for students. Despite shouldering heavy teaching and around-the-clock administrative responsibilities for students who also reside at madrassas, the salaries of madrassa teachers remain disproportionately low. Besides boarding and lodging, madrassa teachers' salaries range between Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 (\$52 to \$104), which is not a substantial amount given the pay-scale for public school teachers who work much shorter hours. It may be due to this limited access to resources that many of the madrassas visited by the researcher welcomed the opportunity to work with other stakeholders who could bring resources to their institutions. Such madrassas particularly remained open to introducing supplemental inputs that did not undermine Islamic precepts and were introduced through bodies they considered legitimate.

Recent madrassa reforms attempts and how religious scholars view them

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had begun reform before the government became interested in the issue.. Such reform attempts involved the introduction of modern subjects alongside the Dars-e-Nizami and requiring students to complete the 10th (or in some cases the 8th) grade for acceptance into the Dars-e-Nizami courses. Madrassas however remained reluctant to modify the religious curriculum without the approval of their wafaqs.

Many prominent madrassas were registered under the Societies Registration Act of 1860, which considered them welfare organizations, with tax exemptions and access to zakat funds. This registration process also conferred a sense of legitimacy to the madrassas. However, in the 1990s, then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto prohibited madrassas from registering under this act in an effort to slow their growth. However, this led to a mushrooming of unregulated madrassas.

The Pakistan Madrassa Education Board (PMEB) was formed in 2001 by former President Pervez Musharraf with an aim to modernize traditional religious seminaries and counter extremism. In June 2002, the Deeni Madaris (Voluntary Registration and Regulation) Ordinance 2002 was approved. The new law required religious schools to register with the PMEB and to have their sources of funding monitored, and anyone found teaching sectarian hatred in a madrassa could be jailed for two years. Over 300 madrassas affiliated themselves with the PMEB and adopted its syllabus, and a model madrassa project backed by a Rs. 30 million grant (\$500,000) was initiated. (Iqbal, 2003)

However, Pakistan's Islamic clergy saw the project as an official intervention in an area that has long been autonomous, and have not lent it their support. Madrassa administrators believed that the ongoing efforts to intrude into madrassa activities were because of foreign pressure. Moreover, several madrassa officials believe that the United States and other external actors seek to de-Islamize Pakistan's religious and mainstream education. The PMEB realized the lack of penetration of its reforms and thus was compelled to establish its own model madrassas Only a handful of Model Deeni Madaris (MDMs) were established under the board. Efforts to prepare new books for model madrassas under the government madrassa reforms initiative was also unsuccessful because they rushed in new content. The merger of Islamic and secular education was not considered systematic, leading to confusion among students and teachers.

After the failure of the Musharraf government's post-9/11 madrassa reforms, renegotiations between the ITMP and the current government led to a compromise between the Ministry of Interior and the madrassa boards. More madrassas were registered, and in exchange, the government promised not to interfere in their curriculum. (Islam, 2010)

Some madrassa heads acknowledge the need for curriculum reforms but they caution that this reform must be done internally, probably by the curriculum committee of the ITMP.

On the other hand, educationists caution that attempts to introduce secular subjects into the madrassa curriculum, or giving madrassas concessions to teach what they like as long as they agree to administrative supervision by the government, will have limited impact on the mindset of madrassa students. The reinforcement of particular perspectives is understandable – all schools of religious thought around the world do this. It becomes counterproductive, however, when it leads to intolerance and violence.

Discussions with educationists and Islamic scholars, including those with influence in Pakistani madrassas, has indicated the as yet overlooked possibility of using existing Islamic thought to broaden the horizons of madrasa students.

Instead of focusing on donor driven strategies, there is a possibility of countering the myopic trends within madrassas using Islamic knowledge itself, by exposing madrasa teachers and students to more tolerant and rational Islamic thinking. Consultations with various religious scholars indicate a possibility of developing supplemental teaching materials which do not contradict the Dars-e-Nizami, but aim to broaden the worldview and enhance the existing knowledge base of both madrasa teachers and students.

There was surprisingly little resistance within madrassas and the Islamic scholars consulted by the researcher to this strategy, which the following section will detail.

Moving forward

Discussions with educationists and Islamic scholars, including those with influence in Pakistani madrassas, has indicated the as yet overlooked possibility of using existing Islamic thought to broaden the horizons of madrasa students. Based on these discussions and secondary research on madrasa reforms in Pakistan, the following suggestions and concerns merit attention

- Proposing changes to the Dars-e-Nizami will be a very complicated process, given that it is already a very politicized and contested issue.
- Developing supplemental training materials using the work of widely respected religious scholars to help expand the worldview of madrasa teachers and students is a generally acceptable, but untested, proposition.
- The above-mentioned effort requires the development of training material, and the identification of relevant stakeholders willing to participate in pilot-testing such an intervention.
- The help of Islamic scholars familiar with the Dars-e-Nizami is vital to the development of a curriculum that would be acceptable to different schools of Islamic thought.
- Preliminary discussions have indicated the possibility of better explaining the Islamic concepts of consent in marriage or property rights for women to help counter unfortunately prevalent gender biases that lead to violence and discrimination against women.
- Teacher training is also needed in addition to curriculum reform to ensure that there is adequate capacity in madrassas to teach the newly-developed content. Participating madrassas will need to be regularly monitored to gauge the success of these reforms.

In addition, lessons must be learnt from the experience of madrasa reform experiences in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and even India.

Policy makers still need to rethink about the kind of supplementary material that is acceptable, and how will it be used. Can there be, for example, a role for the Council of Islamic Ideology in Islamabad to administratively endorse these attempts? It would also be useful to involve stakeholders like the International Islamic University (IIU) to provide content development input, as well as to supervise training, to help lessen the potential paranoia of madrassas willing to participate in such a reform

initiative. This brief research study found ample evidence of madrassas as well as resource people affiliated with entities like the IIU willing to participate in this new approach, which could be piloted and then replicated based on the emergent lessons.

Concluding remarks

The Pakistan government and international donor agencies remain focused on the options that have had limited or no success – increasing administrative and financial control over madrassas, or introducing mainstream subjects like mathematics and English. Conversely, the ongoing reform attempts continue to ignore the knowledge that has been produced in the Islamic world over centuries, which can help counter extremist narratives in madrassas. Interactions with madrassa administrators and teachers as well as other stakeholders indicate that using introducing this knowledge into the curriculum is likely to be a more successful reform measure than what has been tried already. How this can be done merits further consultations with stakeholders, and this option must be explored by the government and the donor community.

Besides pedagogical training, madrassa teachers should be incentivized particularly to utilize any supplemental materials developed for them.

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