

Discourse on Modernity and Tradition in Madrassa Education

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ABSTRACT

Despite being the torch bearers of the glorious tradition of Islamic learning and ethical training, the *madāris* have been the target of Western onslaught in modern times. As immense importance was given to the acquisition of knowledge in Islam, the early centers of Islamic knowledge were imparting education according to the letter and spirit of it, but with the passage of time that tradition could not be upheld. Though *Qarawiyīn*, *Al-Azahar*, *Nizāmiyah* are a few classical *madāris* where religious and secular teachings were incorporated into one, the latter *madāris* separated the religious from the secular (worldly) education. Formation of colonial states made the condition worse. During the Afghan war, the *madāris* flourished in Pakistan but after 9/11 they were deemed responsible for the attack. The paper aims at producing a discourse on this transition of *madrassa* education from tradition to modernity and intends to suggest recommendations for the upgradation and revival of the educational system of *madāris*.

Keywords: *Madrassa, Extremism, Violence, Reforms, Education, Religion.*

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Islam appeared on the globe with the very voice of 'Read' (*Iqra*).⁽¹⁾ In the verse, the creation of man and importance of knowledge has been described. It reveals the fact that the knowledge of creation and necessities of created life is the man's basic need. For this purpose, God is persuading man to get sufficient awareness that may benefit man.

The glorious history of Islamic education is marked by the establishment of educational schools called "*madāris*". The word *madrassa* means

"a place of reading or studying where persons read or study (a college, a collegiate mosque, an academy)".⁽²⁾

According to the Encyclopedia of Religion,

"Madrassa is an educational institution devoted to advanced studies in the Islamic religious sciences."⁽³⁾

The Encyclopedia of Islam states:

"a madrassa is an institution of learning where the Islamic sciences are taught, and where tuition is free, food, lodging and medical care is also provided."⁽⁴⁾

Primitive Place of Learning

The call for knowledge and persuasion to spread it started from the cave of *Hirā*. Firstly, the *Dār Arqam* in Mecca was the seat of this propagation. At a time when open reaching was not possible, the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) conducted his teaching and training here. He did not only provide an explication to the creeds but also the Qur'ānic text and early practices of Islam were taught. The companions used to listen to the Qur'ānic verses here, learned them by heart, exchanged them with each other and the scribes wrote them. Hence, the *Dar Arqam* may be considered as the primitive form of *madrassa* established in Mecca.⁽⁵⁾

Seat of Learning in Madina

Shortly after migration, the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) built a mosque in Madina. This mosque was not only a place of worship but also a center of learning. Here, the Prophet (ﷺ) used to teach them the Qur'ān and the companions also used to learn his sayings and traditions. They were

(1) Sūrah Al-'Alaq:1.

(2) Lane, Edward William, *An Arabic – English Lexicon* (Bayrūt: Librairie Du Liban, 1388/1968),3/871.

(3) Mircea Eliade *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.9 (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987), 77

(4) P. Bearman et. al, *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol.5, "Madrasah," by R. Hillenbrand, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986AD),1124

(5) S. Dr. Dawood Shah, *Prophet Muhammad As a Teacher* (Lahore: Darussalam Publishers),60

instructed about the religious duties and social responsibilities. The tribes who came from far off places used to receive elementary lessons on Islam here. There were nine other mosques in Madina which were frequently visited by the Prophet and were used as teaching centers for the populace. Hence, it was the beginning of the establishment of a *madrasa*.⁽¹⁾

Al-Şuffah: A Residential Madrasa

After the Prophet's (ﷺ) migration to Madina, a simple residential facility in the form of a thatched platform, namely al-Şuffah, was established on a site contiguous to the east of the Prophet's mosque. This was the first classical example of a *madrasa*. According to Qatādah 900 companions used to live here from time to time while some scholars say 400. Recitation and memorization of the Qur'ān, reading, writing and other sciences were taught here. The students trained here were later sent to various tribes to teach them. Among the teachers appointed by the Prophet (ﷺ) include Abdullah b. Mas'ūd as a reciter of the Qur'ān, 'Ubādah bin Şāmit used to teach writing, and 'Abdullah b. Sa'īd b. al-'Ās was a calligraphist.⁽²⁾ Zayd b. Thābit, a companion, was also commanded to learn Hebrew.⁽³⁾ This shows a revolutionary approach of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) towards education that he encouraged his companions to learn foreign languages. It was the prophetic teaching that according to P.K. Hitti

“within a short span of time provided the best talent in all walks of life.”⁽⁴⁾

With the Prophet's (ﷺ) demise the revelation of Qur'ān ceased but the practice of teaching in mosques continued. In this era, the Qur'ān was compiled and its copies were distributed to far off provinces. The pious caliphs sent teachers to those provinces to teach the Book and deliver lectures on the faith and practices. They taught in mosques and sometimes students used to gather at their homes. As a result of conquests, new territories entered in the Muslim domain and their education systems were also assimilated. Hence, after Mecca and Madina, Kūfah, Buşrah, Damascus and Fuşţāţ also became centers of Islamic learning.⁽⁵⁾

(1) S. Dr. Dawood Shah, *Prophet Muhammad As a Teacher*, 60

(2) Ibid.

(3) Muhammad bin Ismail Bukhari, *Al-Jāmi' al-Şāhih*, Kitāb al-aḥkām, Bab Tarjama al-Hukam wahal Yajoozu Tarjuma Wahid, Hadith no: 7195, (Darussalam, Lahore 1998AD)

(4) P.K.Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London: Macmillan, 1960AD), 37

(5) S.M. Ziauddin. Alvi, *Muslim Educational Thought in the Middle Ages* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 1988AD), 2

Madrasas of Umayyad Dynasty

During the Umayyad Dynasty, the knowledge of Qur'ānic text, its commentary and the Prophetic teachings were conveyed to quench the thirst of knowledge seekers. For better comprehension of these two basic sources, the Arabic language, Arabic poetry, Arabic tradition, culture and philology were made the part of syllabus. Also the sayings, decisions and consensus of the companions of Holy Prophet were given place. During this time, the need to derive legal opinion from the two basic sources, Qur'ān and *hadith* was felt and *fiqh* as a branch of knowledge was established. Their education system was influenced by the translations of Greek works on Alchemy, Medicine and Astronomy into Arabic by the order of Khalid b. Yazīd. Mosques were the centers of learning but a special kind of *madrassa* made its first appearance, the *Kuttāb*, in which education in Qur'ān and *hadith* was imparted to the children.⁽¹⁾

Madrasa Education in Idrīsīd Dynasty

One of the oldest *madrassa*, *al-Qarawiyīn* (Al-Karaouine) was established in Fes, Morocco, during the rule of Idrīsīd ruler Yaḥyā b. Muhammad.⁽²⁾ It was associated with al-Qarawiyin Mosque founded in 245/859 by Fātima al-Fihrī in the city of Fes, Morocco.⁽³⁾ This is a typical example to cite that along with men Muslim women also took part in promulgating *madrassa* education. The *madrassa* initially taught Qur'ān and *fiqh*, however, it gradually extended its education to all subjects, particularly the natural sciences. The variety of subjects and the high quality of teaching drew scholars and students from all over the Muslim world. A number of notable scholars taught here such as Ibn al-'Arabī and Ibn Khaldūn. Many great scholars studied here. The Jewish philosopher Ibn Maymūn, also known as Maimonides, (1135-1204) had been a student here. The Christian Gerbert of Aurillac, who became Pope Sylvester II also studied here. The Belgian Nichola Louvain, Flemish Nicolas Cleynaerts, and the Dutch Jacob Golius also studied Arabic here.⁽⁴⁾

Madrasa Education in the Fatimid Dynasty

Another example of a classical *madrassa* is *Al-Azhar* which began as a mosque established in 959 in Cairo, Egypt, by the Fatimid commander

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- (1) S.M. Ziauddin. Alvi, *Muslim Educational Thought in the Middle Ages*, 3
 - (2) Mark Stevens, *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia*, (New York: Barnes & Noble Booksellers, Inc. 122 Fifth Avenue, 2001AD), 574.
 - (3) Anwar Maḥmūd Zanātī, *Mawsū'ah Tarīkh al-'Ālam* (Al-Qāhirah: Kutub al-'Arabiyah, 2007AD), 2/172.
 - (4) <http://muslimheritage.com/article/al-qarawiyin-mosque-and-university>, Accessed: 13 December, 2016

Jawhar al-Şiqillī.⁽¹⁾ It has been the center of learning for the ruling dynasties and a number of notables were produced by this institution. The development of *Al-Azhar* gives a lesson that if a *madrasa* is maintained nicely, its education is upgraded and brought in coherence with the modern research, both in the religious and secular circles; it can achieve higher status as an institution and produce notable figures of the time.

Chain of Madrasas in the Abbasid Regime

The Abbasid regime marks the marvelous period of knowledge transfer. The education was institutionalized as a system. Well organized institutions were established. The knowledge of other civilizations was translated into Arabic and made part of syllabus. This translation and absorption of scientific knowledge made the great revolution of middle ages possible.

The *madrasa Nizāmiyyah* of Baghdad was founded by the great Seljuq vizier, Nizām al-Mulk, in 457/1065. Later, he created a system of state madrasas, called the *Nizāmiyyahs*, in various ‘Abbāsīd cities at the end of the 11th century.⁽²⁾ Under the patronage of the state, proper facilities were provided to both, the students and the teachers, resulting in the success in the promulgation of religious education. In addition to be a system of higher learning in Islamic sciences, the chain of *madrasas* also served to produce the learned men, the ‘*ulamā*, jurists, and teachers who would spread to different parts of the country to share culture and traditions and teach people according to the instructions of the Shafī‘ī school.

Many notables were associated with this *madrasa*. A great Muslim thinker, Imam al-Ghazālī (450-505/1059-1111) was invited from Tus to Baghdad to teach here. He taught there from 1091 to 1095 when he left teaching for his mystic journey.⁽³⁾ Imām al-Haramayn, al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1084) taught at the *madrasa Nizāmiyyah* of Nīshāpur and among his students were al-Ghazali and ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Ṭabari.⁽⁴⁾ Shaykh Sa‘dī also studied at the *madrasa Nizāmiyyah* of Baghdad.⁽⁵⁾

(1) http://ismaili.net/mirrors/242_azhar/azhar.htm, Accessed: 13 December, 2016

(2) Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003AD), 38.

(3) James A. Beverley, ‘*Ghazali, Abu Hamid*’ in *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*, ed Melton, J. Gordon & Baumann, Martin (California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010AD), 1212.

(4) Ozervarli, Mehmet Sait, ‘*Juwayni*’ in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia* ed. by Josef W. Meri (NY; Routledge, 2006AD), 1/428

(5) Murtaza Mutahhari, *The Theory of Knowledge: An Islamic Perspective*, trans. by Mansoor Limba (London: ICAS Press, 2011AD), 23

Madrasa System of Turks

The Ottomans inherited the *madrasa* system of the Seljuk Turks called “*Ottoman medreses*.” In Iznik, the first Ottoman *madrasa* was built in 1331 by the second Ottoman monarch Gazi Orhan Beg. Famous religious scholars like Dawūd al-Qayṣarī, Taj al-Dīn al-Kurdī and ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Aswad used to teach here.⁽¹⁾ When an Ottoman sultan established a new *medrese*, he would invite scholars from the Islamic world. While scholars travelled from Persia to the Ottomans, the flow of knowledge and exchange of culture also occurred vice versa. Many Ottomans also travelled to Egypt, Persia and Turkestan. This mobilisation of the students and teachers of the *madrasas* of the medieval period became one of the major causes for interconnecting people.

During the medieval period, the Muslims were at the zenith of all sciences and all scholars came from the *madrasa* education. The great astronomers, mathematicians, philosophers and physicians came from this system. There were no separate institutions for social sciences or pure sciences. The Muslims adopted the scientific theories of the Greeks, made discoveries and surpassed in all domains of life. However, with the passage of time tides went against them. The crusade wars, the destruction imposed by Tartars, and internal rifts among Muslim rulers weakened the Muslim society. Their interest towards real knowledge gradually faded and the knowledge of various scholastic opinions was considered the sole authority and novelty was considered to be a heretic attitude. Though various factors, e.g. internal differences, continuous hostilities, conspiracies of the enemies, played their role but the stagnant approach towards knowledge was the main factor of their decline.

At this epoch of the history, the western people transmitted the Muslims heritage towards their nations. Based on the work of medieval Muslims, they made great achievements and developed new theories, whereas the Muslims got weaker and weaker and lagged behind in education. After the formation of British colonial rule, a time was reached when most centers of Islamic learning got occupied by the West. During this decline an effort was made in India to revive the Muslim past heritage.

Madrasa Education in the Subcontinent

The *madrasa* education was very deeply rooted in India and was firmly established during the Muslim rule. This was begun by the Arab traders initially in the last part of 7th century when they settled along with their families. Later, during the Arab rule in Sind, several *madrasas* were formally set up in several towns in this region.

(1) G. Irzik & Güven Güzeldere, *Turkish Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* (The Netherlands: Springer, 2005AD), 273

After the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in beginning of 13th century and with the expansion of the Muslim state, a series of *madrasas* were established in different parts of the country. Muslim rulers used to built mosques and establish *maktabs* and *madrasas* with them in the territories which came under their control. In the Tughlaq period (14th century) there had been about one thousand madrasas in Delhi itself.⁽¹⁾

In the post-1857 period, in response to the onslaught of the western culture and declining socio-cultural status of Muslims, the movement of the establishment of *madrasas* thrived through formal institutions (*maktabs* & *madrasas*), informal institutions (houses of *ulema*) and private teachers and tutors (*mu'allim*, *mu'addib* or *atāliq*). The *Şufīs* or mystics of the subcontinent also showed keen interest in teaching and daily spared some times for this purpose at their place of work or residence (*khānqah*).⁽²⁾ Friedman traces that the Muslims were seen as a foreign race in India whose monotheistic beliefs were challenged so openly by polytheistic Hindus, so they strived to keep their religious beliefs and knowledge preserved.⁽³⁾

The syllabus “Dars-i-Nizāmī” was introduced in Indian *madāris* by Mullah Nizam-ud-dīn Sihālvi in the eighteenth century which was adopted by all Sunni Ḥanafī *madāris*.⁽⁴⁾ From the nineteenth century, the *madāris* taught standard text of only one particular legal school of Islamic law. With time, the education at *madāris* was taken over by sectarian interpretation of Islam which divided the society on theological grounds. For instance, in 1866, Dar ul ‘Ulūm Deoband was established in Saharanpur district in Uttar Pradesh.⁽⁵⁾

And Madrasa Manzar-e-Islam was founded in 1904 in Bareilly, India which belonged to the Barylwī school of thought.⁽⁶⁾

In the twentieth century, after the downfall of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of Arab states the *madāris* suffered a strong set back. The post-colonial states preferred secular schools of higher education which ultimately undermined the *madrasa* system in the Muslim world.

(1) Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad Al-Qalqashandi, *Şubḥ al-A’shā* (Cairo: Al-Maktabah ah al-Amiriyah, 1913-1922AD),5/69

(2) Prof. Zafarul Islam, *Origins of Madrasas in India predates Muslim period*, *The Milli Gazette*, (Published Online: Dec 03, 2010),available at: <http://www.milligazette.com/news/178-origins-of-madrasah-education-in-india-predates-muslim-period>

(3) Friedmann Yuhanna, *Islamic Thought in Relation to Indian context* in R.M. Eason(ed.), *India’s & Islamic Tradition 711-1750 AD*, (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2003AD),50

(4) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dars-i_Nizami

(5) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darul_Uloom_Deoband

(6) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manzar-e-Islam>

The graduates from the secular universities were given more prestige due to which the enrollment in the *madāris* dropped and those who joined *madāris* lagged behind in financial success.

However, during the Afghan war, the picture changed rapidly. The number of *madāris* in particular those of the Deoband sect increased rapidly under the patronage of General Zia ul Haq backed by the US aid. A network of *madāris* allowed a great social mobilization in the country but the students were taught on more rigid anti-West and pro-jihad lines to get a support for the Afghan Ṭalibāns.

Current Situation of Madrasa Education

In 2001, 9/11 attacks once again changed the whole scene altogether. America blamed *madrassa* for recruiting jihadi elements and wanted the president General Musharraf to control the spread of *madāris*. It was deemed now that a more enlightened approach towards Islam was the ideal one. The education imparted at the *madrassa* was considered orthodox, obsolete and faulty. Despite the fact that no *madrassa* student was involved in 9/11 and all of them were non-Pakistanis, *madāris* were declared ‘centers of religious militancy and radicalism’. They were thought to propagate extremism, violence in the name of *Sharī‘ah* and anti-West sentiments. In the words of P.W. Singer:

“These schools teach a distorted view of Islam. Hatred is permissible, jihad allows the murder of innocents, and the new heroes are terrorists. Martyrdom through suicide attacks are also extolled, and anti-western speeches are committed to memory. The students are uneducated, young, dependent on the schools, and cut off from contact with their parents for years at a time, and thus highly susceptible to being programmed toward violence.”⁽¹⁾

In line with the ‘war against terror’, the US attacked Afghanistan on Oct. 7, 2001. They launched direct military action against Islamic Militants and Jihadi Organizations to decimate them. And they asked the Muslim countries to close the *madāris* noted for their anti-US character. The military intervention did more harm than good. It raised anti-West sentiments and now many victims of the attack also joined the ‘holy war’ against the disbelievers. Many *madāris* especially those along the Pak-Afghan border remained problematic rather their character assimilated a more jihadi element. The US wanted Pakistan to ‘do more’ against such *madāris* forgetting the repercussions of this step. As it was impossible to

(1) Ms Fatima Sajjad, *Reforming Madrasa Education in Pakistan; Post 9/11 Perspectives*, in *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, 3:1,104-121

totally eliminate the *madāris* spread throughout the length and breadth of the country, it was stressed to introduce reforms.

The International Crisis Group's Asia Report No. 36 suggested

“establishing a madrasa regulatory authority to be headed by the interior minister; instituting curriculum reforms for religious education institutions (REI) within six months; immediately closing down madrasa affiliated with banned militant organizations and prosecuting their leaders if involved in incitement; requiring all madrasa at the time of registration to come up with their annual income, expenditure and audit reports while declaring their assets and sources of funding; creating a nation-wide Financial Intelligence Unit to prevent money laundering; keeping strict tabs on foreign instruments to seek admission in Pakistani madāris; ensuring that madrasa reform is not confined to urban areas but also covers small towns and villages.”⁽¹⁾

The measures appeared to be attractive and alluring but have not produced the required results so far due to the presence of mistrust in the sincerity of the government. The *madrasa* authorities should also understand the current scenario and should follow the instructions given by the government. Following recommendations would help to improve the condition of *madrasa* education.

Recommendations

1. There should be a Syndicate at the federal level which should oversee all five *wifāqs* and co-ordinate their activities. The educational reforms should be implemented after consultation with the *wifāq* representatives so that they are not dissatisfied with the reforms. The issues of registration and financial assistance can also be discussed in the Syndicate. It can also revise the curriculum and propose an acceptable curriculum after consensus which should be free of sectarian tinge and fundamentalist tone. The syndicate would encourage the *madāris* to show flexibility and broadness of vision.
2. The revised curriculum should meet the needs and requirements of this age. In addition to Qur'ān, *hadith* and *fiqh*, some other disciplines of knowledge should also be taught at the *madāris* like sciences, literature, logic, fine arts etc. Modern languages especially English should also be taught along with Arabic and Urdu. The government should provide funds to religious institutions for realizing these objectives.

(1) ICG Asia Report No.36, “Pakistan, Madrassas, extremism and the military.” July 29, 2002

3. There should be a department of Occidental studies in religious institutions. The comparative study of the world religions should be taught with due attention to the tolerance and pluralism that would initiate cultural contact and religious and ideological dialogue among various communities of the world.
4. The students of *madāris* should be provided training in some technical skill or trade after completing certain stage of their religious education so that they could support their families and play more constructive role in the society.
5. The unneeded old books which do not hold any practical application should be removed from the curriculum and new subject included like *Iqbāliyyāt* which would touch them with religion, philosophy, history and politics.
6. Special workshops and orientation courses may be arranged on a regular basis in the *madāris*. The teachers and students from the *madāris* should be allowed to join conferences arranged by the colleges and universities. This would broaden their view of life.
7. To achieve uniformity in education, a well-defined gradation and entry-exit system is essential. No student leaving an institution should be allowed entry into another unless he/she produces some kind of NOC and educational certificate from the relevant *Wifāq*.
8. Students need to be provided better boarding facilities, quality food, libraries, playing grounds and sports facility to promote co-curricular activities among them.
9. The *madāris* should be upgraded to provide research facilities to the students. Special degrees in Qur'ān, *hadith*, *fiqh* and other Islamic disciplines should be included. A *maktab* can be expanded into a *madrasa* and then a *madrasa* into a *jāmi'ah*. *Madāris* can be given funds to publish their research papers.
10. The *madrasa* having female students should also be upgraded and provide the facilities available for male students.

