

## THE ROLE OF MADARIS IN PAKISTAN SINCE 1980: ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to identify and discuss the social, political and economic dimensions of the role of madaris in Pakistan in the post-1980 era. The subject is important and relevant in the given regional political scenario and the growing menace of terrorism in Pakistan. The collapse of socio-economic system and questions related to the role of madaris has attracted both public and scholarly attention in many countries including Pakistan. What is their contribution to the make-up of Pakistani society? What should they contribute? Are some or most of the madaris involved in organized violence? Questions have also been raised about the impact of madaris on social and political systems. Why is that most of the children in Pakistan remaining out of the sphere of the public education system? What would be the alternative to the education and social welfare provided by the madaris? Is the anti-Americanism in Pakistan in general and in madaris in particular a response to US foreign policy decisions? In view of the above questions this paper also addresses such issues as (1) the US and Pakistan governments' historical and contemporary links with extremist organizations (2) the role of madaris in Pakistan and its impact on regional stability, social values, economic growth and political culture. These issues need serious attention so as to establish a clear idea of the global threat of terrorism.*

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### **Background**

It is difficult to understand the subject without understanding the regional political milieu in the 1980s. Also, a brief history of madaris would help understand their role especially after 1980.

### **The introduction to Islamic education in India**

The educational traditions of Islam in the sub-continent were developed during the Muslim rule (1206-1857 AD) in India. The educational gains were first consolidated in Sindh, which became an integral part of the Arab Empire in 711 A.D. During the next two centuries, under the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, when

universities and institutions of higher learning were founded in every part of the Empire, the cities of Mansurah, Daibul, Sehwan and Multan became the centers of higher education in Sindh.

During the three hundred years of the Arab rule in Sindh (711-1100 A.D.), education seems to have been widely diffused in all parts of Sindh, with the result that the gap between the different spoken dialects of Sindh was minimized and a common provincial language 'Sindhi' emerged as a medium of thought and expression side by side with the Arabic. The Arab governors of Sindh extended their special patronage to the development of the native language. Great impetus was given to technical education, and local industries were greatly encouraged. Higher research in the field of literature was carried on by translating Arabic works into the Indian languages and Sanskrit works into Arabic. In the field of sciences, there is evidence of historical research, geographical explorations, astronomical calculations as well as zoological observations of animals and certain species of fish in the Indus (Baloch, N.A., 2003: 29).

### **The beginning of Indo-Islamic education**

This early Arab rule, however, was limited to Sindh territories in the north-western part of India. The foundations of the greater Indo-Islamic power were laid by the emperors of Ghazna and Ghur in the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. when research, scholarship and education were at their zenith in the Islamic world of the Middle East and Central Asia. Mahmud of Ghazna who established his power in northern India (988-1020 A.D.) is generally famous for his military exploits. But he was a great patron of poets, philosophers, and research scholars in every field, and they thronged to his court. His capital, Ghazna, had probably, even before him, become a great seat of learning and possessed renowned libraries ever since its early conquest (661 A. D.) under the Arabs (*ibid*: 30).

The most renowned scholar al-Beruni started his laborious researches into all aspects of Indian life and incorporated them in his monumental work 'India' which remains unsurpassed as an authentic and comprehensive research work on the Hindu life and culture. This initial establishment of the Indo-Islamic power, which was accompanied by high traditions of scholarship, investigation and research, soon after its extension and consolidation in the

whole of India, produced an unparalleled educational atmosphere (*ibid*). The historian Berni records that the scholars during the Delhi Sultanate period excelled even the best brains of Bukhara, Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Isphahan, and Tabrez. During the Mughal period (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.) the Indo-Islamic system of education reached its zenith. A new curriculum suited to the conditions of Indian life was gradually evolved.

### **Origin and evolution of madaris in South Asia**

A renowned and famous Bengali writer and scholar Mumtaz Ahmad in his article on Madrassa education in Pakistan and Bangladesh observed that the revival of 'Islamic religious education' must be seen in the context of the history of Islamic education in India which started with the formation of Deoband Madrassa in 1867. He is of the view that:

'Since 1867, the madrassa system has played an important historical role by preserving the orthodox tradition of Islam in the wake of the downfall of Muslim political power; by training generations of Islamic religious scholars and functionaries; by providing vigorous religio-political leadership; and more importantly, by reawakening the consciousness of Islamic solidarity and the Islamic way of life among the Muslims of South Asia. The madaris in Muslim South Asian world teach a curriculum known as *Dars-i-Nizami*, first introduced by Mullah Nizamuddin Siharvi (d. 1747) who was a scholar of some repute in Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy in Lucknow. This curriculum is not the same as that associated with the name Mullah Nasiruddin Tusi (d. 1064) and the Madrassa Nizamia which he established in eleventh-century Baghdad (*Mumtaz Ahmed, www.apess.org: 102*).

The standard Nizami course adopted by Deoband madrassa in 1867 is in use in almost all Sunni madaris without regards to which school of thought they follow. There are around 20 subjects which are divided into two categories: those related to the sciences transmitted through cramming from generation to generation and those related to sciences having their foundation in reason. 'The subject areas include grammar, rhetoric, prosody, logic, philosophy, Arabic literature, dialectical theology, life of the Prophet, medicine, mathematics, polemics, Islamic law,

jurisprudence, Hadith, and Tafsir (exegesis of the Quran) (*ibid*).’ The Nizami course was designed to equip students with the knowledge and skills not only to understand scriptures but also to enable them to compete for government jobs. ‘As is well known, most of the books taught in this curriculum are very old. Books used in philosophy and logic, for example, were written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Medicine is taught through an eleventh-century text that is still considered an authentic study of human anatomy and pathology (*ibid*: 104).’ Such is the case with most of the religious texts and books used for instructions in astronomy and mathematics. This state of affairs in itself underscores the need to modernize madrasa curriculum keeping in view the tremendous developments not only in understanding nature but also religious texts.

### **Madaris in Pakistan**

Madaris in Pakistan impart education at three levels: elementary, where only Quran is taught and students memorize it; intermediate level where some texts of the Nizami course are covered and higher level where the entire Nizami course is covered. Subject to the availability of competent ulema, some students also opt for higher studies in ‘tafsir, hadith or fiqh’. Most of madrasa education in Pakistan is in the private sector while some of it is managed and regulated by the Auqaf department in each province. Most of the madaris are owned by ulemas of good standing who manage these madaris on their own. Given their high standing in the society these ulema get a lot of help in terms of acquiring land, housing and financial facilities for the madaris.

Most madaris in Pakistan are registered as charities and as such are not required to pay taxes. In some cases business elites, landlords and prominent ulemas make up the governing bodies of certain madaris. Mumtaz Ahmad believes that ‘in most cases, these are merely ceremonial bodies, meant largely to provide decorum and legitimacy to the respective madaris. Major policy decisions regarding doctrinal preferences, curriculum, and selection of teachers and students remain the exclusive prerogative of the ulema (*ibid*).’

The madrasa system is a major alternate provider of education in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. It imparts education to nearly



six million students. Most of these students opt for madrassa education because of poor economic conditions of their families due to which they cannot afford the education provided by the state. From social mobility point of view madrassa education is considered as the 'surest path' available to low income families to move from a status of lower social order to a higher one. Such a move is accompanied by not only an increase in family income but also prestige.

### **Reforming Islamic education in Pakistan**

Madaris are notoriously resistant to change. Consequently what ever little changes have occurred in their curriculum and teaching methodology were either induced from outside or came about as a response to state policies. A case in point is the modernizing policies of Ayub Khan's regime in the 1960s. Ayub's policies and the emphasis on modernization directly questioned the 'centrality of ulema in Pakistan's religio-political life'. The ulemas response has been termed as 'most creative.' The number of higher madaris increased. Not only was that but small feeder madaris also established in order to increase the number of students. The management of madaris was streamlined through the establishment of madaris boards. 'These federations helped introduce reformed syllabi, rationalized the examination system, and afforded the ulema an effective platform for coordinating their strategies aimed at countering the government's efforts to reduce their social and political influence and social autonomy'. The response also led to an institutionalization of madrassa education on more sound bases. Inclusion of members of the trading community in the management structures of madaris provided them with a handy source of much needed finances.

Spectacular economic growth during the decade of 1960 brought benefits for madaris in terms of cheap land. The expansion of a number of madaris during this time hints at the underlining relationship between 'economic growth, urban development and religious renaissance'. Madaris like Oarul Uloom, Madrassa Arabiya Islamiya, and Dar-ul-Uloom Amjadiya of Karachi; Iamia Ashrafiya, Iamia Nayimiya, Iamia Madina, and Dar-ul-Uloom Hizbul Ahnaf of Lahore; Madrassa Khairul Madaris and Madrassa Qasimul Uloom of Multan; and Oarul Uloom Haqqaniya of Akora

Khatak and Dar-ul-Ulum Sarhad of Peshawar underwent huge expansion. The economic growth was pivotal in providing the madaris with a new class of financiers; those from the emerging middle class. The religious establishment not only withstood the challenge from the state but also adjusted its financial base according to new economic realities (*ibid: 110-111*).

The adjustments were witnessed not only in the management and financial realm but important changes also took place in the curriculum. English language was introduced. Comparative religion, history and law were given due attention. A number of 'madaris in Punjab linked their courses of studies with the general education curriculum, thus enabling their students to acquire degrees from the government schools and colleges and obtain jobs in the "secular" sector also (*ibid: 111*).' Prominent ulemas encouraged their sons to acquire modern education so that they can effectively deal with emerging new realities. The appointment of a number of ulemas as judges of Shariat court and members of the Council of Islamic Ideology during Bhutto and Zia's regime are ample proof that the religious establishment responded in an effective manner to emerging challenges.

Post-9/11, there has been a lot of pressure on Pakistan from the international community to regulate the activities of madaris and to reform their curriculum. In 2001 and 2002, 'the government issued two ordinances designed, respectively, to establish new exemplary Islamic boarding schools and to regulate better the existing Islamic boarding schools (*Christopher Candland, 2005: 151*). The Model Dini Madaris Ordinance was a step in the right direction but it has been hampered by limited applicability.

### **Regional political environment**

In 1967 two major events took place, having serious implications for the regional political stability. The first was the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union and the second event was the Islamic Revolution in Iran. These two events alerted the US and its traditional ally, Saudi Arabia, to take measures to safeguard their mutual interests against communism and to counter the threat from the growing power of Iran. In Pakistan Zia-ul-Haq was busy in disarming pro-Bhutto adversaries to keep his hold on power. Taking his guidance from the US, he

politicized Islamic associations for his own ends. His policies continue to influence the perception of the general public towards the ulemas in society.

Christopher Candland is of the view that Zia's policies engendered and overplayed sectarian divides often resulting in violence. His measures accorded preference to one school of thought and tried to impose its opinion on social policy. Jamaat-e-Islami was the main beneficiary of Zia's policies. Candland notes that:

'In 1979 Zia began to promote 'islamization', he established the federal shariat court to test for repugnancy to Islam. Zia also enhanced the authority of the Islamic Ideology Council to recommend policies and laws in accordance with Islam and to advise on whether any policies or laws were repugnant to Islam. Zia also promulgated a series of ordinances commonly known as the Hudood ordinances in 1979.' The US government also conflated military and religious activities. The US used madaris and Islamic teachings to promote militancy during the war against the Soviet Union. In fact all such steps by Zia-ul-Haq were taken to serve US interests in the region and to get as much as possible benefits in terms of US aid, not for the country but for the development of so called Islamic society (*ibid*).'

US policies vis-à-vis Pakistan promoted religious and military activities in Pakistan and madaris were used for this purpose. They were heavily funded by the US agencies to promote and provoke Muslims' sentiments against the Soviet Union. According to Christopher Candland the US spent 51 million dollars for this purpose. During the war against Soviet Union in Afghanistan, US allocated a budget of 51 million dollars to US agencies. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) disbursed huge amount of funds for this purpose. The Centre for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha developed text books that gave religious sanction to armed struggle in defence of Islam. Thirteen million volumes were distributed. Other US agencies also played their part in promoting a militant Islam. The relationship between military and the madaris is a complex one. At one end they have suspicions against each other and at the other they cooperate to achieve mutual goals. Christopher suggests that violence and intolerance we see in religious parties must be

analyzed in the context of use of religion by both local and foreign agencies to achieve military goals. The decade long anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan engendered culture of violence in Pakistan. This 'kalashnikov' culture is especially pervasive in provinces bordering Afghanistan. The madaris were also hit by this wave of militarization. According to Christopher Candland, many madaris took Afghan refugees as students. Additionally, the Pakistani and US governments used the madaris and influenced their curriculum to encourage and promote a sectarian and militant mindset among the students.

The result is that most madrassa students take jihad as armed struggle to impose Islamic interpretation of state upon the society. The failure of the public education system to provide cheap and quality education also exacerbate the situation. Even where the public education is provided it is not very useful in turning the economic fortunes of downtrodden families. Most of those who go through the public education system remain jobless.

Christopher Candland observes 'the Pakistani state has failed to meet one of the most basic requirements of any modern state; the provision of education to its young generation. As a result the life opportunities of millions are being forfeited (*ibid*).'

Madaris in Pakistan appear to fulfill the basic functions of state given their more responsive attitude to social needs. This state of affairs underscores the fact that Pakistan state has failed to fulfill its basic duties. This failure becomes all too apparent when it comes to the regulation of madaris and institutionalization of their basic function. This failure has led to madaris not performing their basic task of equipping future ulemas with skills and education to understand the Quran and Ahadith and to seek guidance with regard to changed times and realities. Consequently the ulemas have lost their social relevance in Pakistani society. On the other hand Islamic political parties have propagated a certain interpretation of Islam in order to garner political benefits. This has further eroded the significance of ulema in Pakistani society. The failure of the state strengthens the appeal of Islamic political parties providing them with ready recruits in their cadres.



## Role of Madaris

Historically, the role of madaris was clearly defined. It was to save and promote Islamic teachings. For centuries Islamic schools have preserved and transmitted knowledge. The history of Islam is witness to the importance of madaris in Muslim societies as places for propagating knowledge and generates debate.

Languages, literature, reasoning, rhetoric and natural sciences were taught in the early years of Islam. Those madaris were known for their well preserved Hanafi teachings. Before 1980, ordinary Pakistanis thought of madaris to be places where an education based on the ethics of Islam was imparted in an affordable manner. It is an irony that after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan these ethical institutions were made volatile and hate based dens. The influx of more than 5 million refugees disrupted the social fabric of Pakistani society. The US needed 'mujahideen' to fight the Soviet Army. For this purpose madaris were heavily funded through Zia-ul-Haq's military regime. To serve that purpose a rapid growth of madaris took place especially in the NWFP and Balochistan. Young Afghan refugees were admitted in these madaris where they were taught nothing but hatred. Most of the students belonged to lower income families of NWFP, Kashmir and Punjab. According to Mumtaz Ahmed, a survey was conducted in 1976 and it was found that 'more than 80% of the madaris' students in Peshawar, Multan and Gujranwala were the sons of small or landless peasants, rural artisans or imams of the village mosques. The remaining 20% came from families of small shopkeepers and rural labourers (*Mumtaz Ahmad: 108*).

More recent statistics record an increase in the number of students belonging to peasant families and small-scale traders. 'The interesting thing to note is that the number of students whose fathers were employed in lower level private sector jobs rose from 5% in 1976 to 35% in 2000. Only 3% of students in the 2000 survey said that their fathers were imams of the mosques. The majority of the students came from large but low income families (*Rehman Khalid, [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com)*).' The 2000 survey found that 63% of madaris' students had five or more siblings and 28% of them had seven or more brothers. Mumtaz Ahmad observed that the preference given to students belonging to a certain race in some madaris is an 'extraneous phenomenon'. It points towards a

political move to use religious zeal and motivation to achieve the vested interests of some foreign and local power wielders (*Mumtaz Ahmed: 109*). His observation may not be denied but it is also true that despite being engaged in traditional Islamic studies most of the madaris are being used for militant activities especially since 1980.

As mentioned earlier, most of the madaris are located in areas bordering Afghanistan. The majority of the Afghan students of these madaris took active part in the anti-Soviet Afghan war. It must be kept in mind that the more than 5 million Afghan refugees were camped mostly in NWFP and Balochistan. Nearly 40 per cent of them were of school-going age (*Chrislopher Torchia, July 21, 2005, AP online*). Most of the madaris which later took active part in the Afghan-Soviet war were established in the 1980s. These madaris were not intended to impart Islamic teachings but were training camps where 'Mujahideen' were trained in guerilla warfare to fight against the Soviets. They were given the cover of madaris to enhance their acceptance among the general public. These madaris taught a particularly violent interpretation of jihad and thus, are integrally linked to the Afghan jihad. The overarching environment of the Cold War provided ideal conditions for such operations.

Pakistan's security dilemmas vis-à-vis India pushed it to use the remnants of the Afghan jihad against India in Kashmir. Both domestic and international actors were involved in this endeavour. The escalation of violence in Kashmir and resulting increase in the number of jihadi movements in the 1990s brought this phenomenon to the urban areas of Pakistan. Here it became linked with sectarianism and resulted in more violence and bloodshed. Anti-India sentiments further entrenched this culture of violence in the social fabric of Pakistan.

Despite serious allegations against the madaris, one cannot overlook their social significance and economic role in our society. They are major factor of social mobility by providing education as well as access to jobs. Given the pathetic condition of public education in Pakistan most of the students who go through this system remain unemployed. In contrast, as statistics have shown, the students of madaris rarely stay jobless. A survey in 1974 showed that among the graduates of the 1978 class of two major madaris in Karachi and one in NWFP, only 6 percent were still

unemployed by the middle of 1979. It would be difficult to deny that despite remaining an isolated phenomenon, *madaris* have played a powerful social, political and economic role in Pakistan.

In mid 1990s, Taliban, mainly Afghan refugees trained at the *Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Madaris* in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province rose to power in Kabul by toppling the Afghan government. They promulgated laws based on a particularly strict interpretation of Islam which prohibited women education and made beard mandatory for men. The principles governing the state and society which the Taliban learned and applied were strict and unforgiving and drew criticism from the international community.

## Conclusion

A *madrassa* affiliated to a political party is not a very old phenomenon in South Asia especially in Pakistan. The origin of such *madaris* can be traced back to the time of Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979. Also such *madaris* owe their existence to sectarian politics which has dominated Pakistan's political landscape for most of the time of its independence. The *madaris* which were established in the 1980s shared the burden of the government in looking after huge number of Afghan refugees. They also provided training camps to local and international actors to train and equip Afghan *mujahideen* against the Soviet Union. These *madaris* produced the Taliban who finally toppled the Afghan government and kept themselves engaged in Kashmir Jihad.

After 9/11 these *madaris* faced extreme pressure and criticism in Pakistan and outside. They came to be known as breeding grounds for violence. The image is misleading but is not without reason. However, no one can deny their role in shaping and reshaping domestic and foreign policies of Pakistan and the US. *Madaris* definitely need reforms so that they could play their conventional positive role in securing true Islamic teaching which is based on merit, justice and mutual respect.

The case of *madaris* in Pakistan presents a peculiar picture of misplaced priorities and missed opportunities. Due to negligence on the part of the state to regulate and monitor *madrassa* education, it deviated and went awry. Post-9/11, the international community has increasingly pointed an accusing finger towards the *madaris*.



The number of madaris has increased substantially in Pakistan during the last 20 years. As of 2002, the number of madaris, according to the statistics of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, stands at 6,528 enrolling about 1.2 million students. Nobody knows for sure what the actual number of madaris in Pakistan is but some say that it may be as high as 33,000 (*Uzma Anzar: 17*).

The number of madaris in Pakistan swelled as a result of the Soviet-Afghan war. Prior to that the number of madaris in Pakistan was very low and they were mainly engaged in training the next generation of religious scholars. Beginning in the 1970s, certain domestic and regional determinants influenced the number and functioning of the madaris in Pakistan. On the domestic scene, Jamaat-e-Islami, with the active support of the state machinery was able to manipulate the existing social order for political ends. As a result the number of madaris expanded. Petro-dollars started coming in from the conservative Sunni states of the Gulf and they were used in building new and bigger madaris. The Islamic Revolution in Iran provided the Shia minority of Pakistan with a fresh breath of air and they started building their own madaris with the active support of Iran (*ibid*). In short, historical animosity between the two major interpretations of Islam played itself out in Pakistan.

Under Zia the process of Islamization gained further momentum in Pakistan. The 1980s were witness to another international political game (this time between the two super powers) played on Pakistani soil. The CIA with the active collaboration of Pakistani agencies channeled huge funds to religious seminaries on the Afghan-Pakistan border. The aim was to develop a cadre of religiously motivated guerilla fighters who could fight US proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The syllabus of these seminaries was designed to instill a particularly violent interpretation of jihad and to develop a virulent militant mindset. In fact students learned basic mathematics by counting dead Russians and hand grenades (*ibid: 18-19*).

The US proxy war in Afghanistan bled and forced the Soviet Union to withdraw. It was a combination of religious fervor and high-tech weapons from major powers which enabled the Mujahideen to defeat the Soviets. The fall of Zia followed soon after and Pakistan was catapulted into a series of political bickering



between various political parties. The state machinery was unable to check and regulate these seminaries and they started generating more funds from individuals and charities. The US withdrew from Afghanistan to revel in its new status of sole super power. It left the Afghans in a lurch. The thinking was that the madrassa students would unlearn the lessons which were taught to enable them to fight the Soviets. This never came about. The failure of Pakistan state to absorb the former Mujahideen into the mainstream and to provide them with alternative livelihoods and the continuing instability in Afghanistan kept the role of these seminaries alive. New cadres of Mujahideen started armed struggle to topple corrupt Afghan government and fight holy war in Kashmir and Bosnia etc. At the same time seminaries of particular sects flourished in Pakistan with the aim of enforcing their world views. The result was more chaos and more bloodshed. The hatred against the Russian empire shifted towards the West after the fall of Soviet Union in December 1991. The US, which was thought to be in league with anti-Islam forces, was a particularly target of that hatred. A particularly puritanical version of Islam, Wahabism was promoted by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait through huge financial inputs. The idea was to develop a brigade of Muslim youth professing in the Wahabi interpretation of Islam and try to restore Islam to its bygone glory. The Palestine issue generated a wave of Islamic fervor through out the Muslim world and opposing Israel came to be regarded as necessary element of faith. Thus, Pakistani madaris came under a vicious circle from which there was no way out.

To sum up, the inability of Pakistan to fulfill its duties as a State, continuing economic stagnation, political instability leading to inter-party feuds, the particular conditions set by the Cold War and the Islamic Revolution in Iran and finally the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, played a crucial role in giving Pakistani madaris their particularly violent image. Pakistani society is yet to come to terms with the forces unleashed by this virulent mix of politics and religion.

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