

YOGINDER SIKAND

Reforming the Indian Madrassas: Contemporary Muslim Voices

M*adrassas*, or Islamic schools, serve an important function in the lives of many Muslims in India today. No reliable figures exist for the number of madrassas in India, but there are estimated to be several thousand.¹ Many of them are just mosque schools (*maktabs*) where Muslim children are taught to read the Quran and memorize parts of it and are also taught Urdu and the basics of the faith. Several large madrassas also exist, with smaller ones loosely affiliated to them. Some of these have exercised, and continue to exercise, an important influence on Muslims in other countries, especially (but not only) among the South Asian diaspora.

This paper deals with the question of reforms in the Indian madrassas, looking at how the demands for reform are being articulated by Muslims in India today, both *ulema* as well as others. It focuses on the rationale for reform, the forms that these reforms should take and the impact of these suggested measures, concluding with a brief reflection on the debate in India today about the alleged links of some

1. Manzoor Ahmed, in his study of Indian Muslim education, estimated the number of madrassas at around thirty thousand. See Manzoor Ahmad, *Islamic Education: Redefinitions of Aims and Methodology* (New Delhi: Genuine Publications, 2002), 32.

madrassas with outside radical Islamist movements, examining how this debate has impacted efforts to reform the madrassas.

As Zaman writes in his study of madrassas in Pakistan, the significance of contemporary initiatives at reforming the madrassas has not been properly appreciated.² The issue of madrasa reform has crucial implications for Muslim education in India, the nature of Muslim leadership, and for community agendas. Because of the links, in terms of shared traditions that some of the leading Indian madrassas have with madrassas elsewhere—particularly in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal—and the influence that Indian ulema have, since the last century, had on Muslims in other countries, reforms in the Indian madrasa system have a broader relevance than in the Indian Muslim community alone.

Traditional Madrasa Education in India

ACQUISITION OF ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE is said to be a fundamental duty binding on all Muslims. From the time of the Prophet until the eleventh century, education, principally the study of the Quran, and later the *hadith* (Prophetic Traditions), was provided in the mosques and was, at least in theory, open to all Muslims free of cost. With the development of Sufism from the third Islamic century onward, education was also imparted in Sufi lodges by Sufi masters. Islamic education was seen as not merely the transmission of knowledge but, above all, as aimed at the molding of the character of the student, who was expected to follow as closely as possible the pattern of the Prophet and his companions.

Although the early Muslim community lacked a class of priests—for the Quran sternly forbids intermediaries between the individual believer and God—by the eleventh century, with the establishment of large Muslim empires, a class of clerics, specializing in the minutiae of Islamic law, gradually developed. This went hand-in-hand with the emergence of a specialized institution for Islamic learning separate from the mosque, the madrasa. Although there is evidence of smaller madrassas having existed earlier, the first state-sponsored

2. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The *Madrasa* in British India and Pakistan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 2 (April 1999): 295.

madrassa in the Muslim world, which was to set the pattern for madrassas elsewhere, is said to have been the Nizamia Madrassa at Baghdad, founded by the eleventh century Seljuq Vizier Nizam-ul Mulk Hasan ibn 'Ali, and called the Nizamia Madrassa after him. Nizam-ul Mulk later established several other such madrassas, such as the one in Nishapur. These institutions aimed at the training of a class of experts in Islamic law, ulema, who would go on to staff the bureaucracy of the state as judges (*qazis*) and *muftis* as well as administrators. Thus, at the very outset, the institution of the officially sponsored madrassa was seen as serving as an arm of the state, and over time the ulema attached to the royal courts were to be used to legitimize state authority. Nizam-ul Mulk is said to have been particularly concerned with the growing popularity of the rationalist Muta'zilites and the Isma'ili missionaries who were very active in his time and posed a threat to the Sunni establishment and the Seljuq state. The ulema of his madrassas were seen as a bulwark against the threat posed by these groups by upholding 'Asharite and Shafi'i orthodoxy.³

The syllabus employed at the Nizamia madrassa, which served as a model for madrassas elsewhere, represented a blend of *naqli 'ulum* (revealed sciences), including the Quran, the hadith, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *tafsir* (Quranic commentary), on the one hand, and the *aqli 'ulum* (rational sciences), including Arabic language, grammar, logic, rhetoric, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, physics and mathematics, on the other. In medieval times, the madrassas served as the only available centers of formal education for Muslims. Their graduates went on to assume a variety of occupations, such as administrators and military officers, as well as what would today be called strictly "religious" posts as judges in religious courts, teachers in Islamic schools and prayer leaders in mosques (*imams*).

In north India the earliest available evidence of madrassas dates back to the late twelfth century, when Sultan Muhammed Ghori conquered Ajmer in 1191, in present-day Rajasthan, and set up a madrassa in the town. As Turkish rule expanded over other parts of India, Muslim rulers established madrassas in their own domains, providing

3. Zia ul-Hasan Faruqi, *Musalmano Ka Ta'limi Nizam* (The educational system of the Muslims) (Delhi: Maktaba Jami'a, 1992), 6061.

them with extensive land grants (*jagirs, madad-i-ma'ash*) for meeting their expenses and scholarships for their students. Muslim nobles and scholars also followed suit and set up large educational centers. Great centers of Islamic knowledge emerged in various parts of India, and the madrassas of Gujarat, Uch (Sind), Multan (Punjab), Delhi, Pandua and Gaur (Bengal), Bidar, Gulbarga and Aurangabad (Deccan) were among the most renowned in the entire Muslim world at their time. Generally, despite the Quranic insistence on the equality of all believers, students and teachers at the madrassas were drawn from the Muslim elite—the *ashraf* nobility—consisting of migrants from Central Asia, Iran and Arabia, and their descendants. The thirteenth-century court historian Ziauddin Barani insisted that higher education must remain a closely guarded preserve of the *ashraf*. The “base-born” *ajlaf*, Muslims of indigenous origin, he insisted, must remain content with just a basic knowledge of the Islamic faith and rituals.⁴

The syllabus employed at the Indian madrassas went through a process of gradual transformation over time, corresponding with the changing needs of the state.⁵ Until the early sixteenth century, the focus of the madrassas was essentially on *fiqh*, the details of Islamic jurisprudence. From then onward, and particularly from the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, philosophy and logic and other “rational disciplines” (*ma'qulat*) grew in importance, while strictly “religious” disciplines seem to have been less central. With the efforts of the early eighteenth-century Shah Waliullah, the study of *hadith* began to be emphasized. Shah Waliullah, whose legacy is today claimed by most contemporary South Asian Muslim schools of *ulema*, returned from a stay of several years in Arabia, and introduced for the first time the teaching of the six canonical collections of *hadith* (*sahih sitta*) in his father's school, the Madrassa-i-Rahimiya, in Delhi. He insisted that the *naqli 'ulum* must form the core of the madrassa syllabus, and was opposed to what he saw as the excessive

4. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darsgahe* (The religious schools of India) (Hamdard Educational Society, 1996), 33–40.

5. For a history of the syllabus and methods of teaching of the Indian madrassas, see Abul Hasnat Nadwi, *Hindustan Ke Qadim Islami Darsgahe* (The old Islamic schools of India) (Azamgarh: Dar-ul Musannifin, 1971); Muhammad Sharif Khan, *Education, Religion and Modern Age* (New Delhi: Asish Publishing House, 1999), 84–102.

focus in the curriculum on the aqli 'ulum, particularly Greek philosophy and logic.⁶

Shah Waliullah's efforts to reform the madrasa syllabus met with little success, however, as the center for Islamic education had, by this time, shifted eastwards, from Delhi to Lucknow.⁷ In the mid-eighteenth century, Mulla Nizamuddin (d. 1748), scion of a family of learned Mughal ulema, established himself at the Firanghi Mahal in Lucknow, a mansion that belonged to a European merchant but had been gifted to the mulla by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. There he set about preparing a reformed madrasa syllabus, named after him as the *Dars-i-Nizami*. The syllabus included new books on hadith and Quranic commentary, but the focus on the rational sciences remained, for products of the madrasa were to be trained not only for strictly religious posts but also as general administrators and functionaries in the state bureaucracies.⁸

With the establishment of British rule, the madrasas were faced with what was seen as a grave threat to their existence and identity. In the 1830s, Persian was replaced with English as the language of official correspondence by the East India Company in the territories under its control. State-employed *qazis* were replaced by judges trained in British law, as the application of Muslim law was restricted only to personal affairs.⁹ A new system of education was gradually set up, where Islam had no place. Many of these modern schools were established by Christian missionaries, whose antipathy for Islam was well known. The endowed properties of several madrasas were also resumed by the East India Company. Thus, increasingly bereft of royal patronage and finding their avenues of employment greatly restricted, the madrasa system and the ulema as a class had now to contend with a major challenge to their survival.

6. Khalid Saifullah Rahmani, introduction to *Dini Madaris Aur 'Asr-i-Hazir* (Religious schools and the modern age), by Muhammad Rizwan-ul Qasmi (Hyderabad: Markaz Da'wat-o-Tahqiqat, 1994), 8.

7. Mohammad Akhtar Siddiqui, "Development and Trends in Madrasa Education," in A. W. B. Qadri, Riaz Shakir Khan and Mohammad Akhter Siddique, eds., *Education and Muslims in India Since Independence* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1998), 81.

8. Francis Robinson, *The ulema of Firangi Mahal and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

9. Although, of course, under the Mughals and even earlier, the *shari'a* was never enforced in its entirety.

The revolt of 1857, in which several Indian ulema are said to have played an important role, represented, in a sense, an effort on the part of the increasingly threatened ulema to defend their privileges. With the failure of the revolt, many ulema turned now to setting up a chain of madrassas, for it was felt that under alien rule Islam was under grave threat and that it was only by preserving and promoting Islamic knowledge that the younger generation of Muslims could be saved from sliding into apostasy and prevented from falling prey to the blandishments of the Christian missionaries. Because they perceived themselves under siege and saw Islam as under attack by the Christian British, the ulema seem to have adopted a deeply hostile attitude toward Western knowledge. The “educational jihad” that they now launched to preserve traditional Islamic learning was seen as taking the place of the failed physical jihad against the British,¹⁰ and as working to train a class of ulema who would take revenge on the British for having overthrown the Mughals.¹¹ Thus, the madrassas that they set about establishing closed their doors to modern knowledge, which was seen as somehow “un-Islamic,” owing to its association with the British. This was the beginning of the great divide between what was now seen as “religious” (*dini*) knowledge, on the one hand, and modern “worldly” (*duniyavi*) learning, on the other, the two being seen as opposed to each other.¹² Because of the way in which this hierarchy of knowledge was constructed, the curriculum of the madrassas came to be seen as almost entirely unchangeable, although in the past it had been subject to considerable change over time.¹³

The setting up of the Dar-ul-Ulum Madrassa in Deoband in 1865, today the largest traditional madrassa in the world, marked a turning point in the history of madrassa education in India.¹⁴ In contrast to past precedent, the madrassa eschewed all patronage from the state

10. *Kul Hind Dini Madaris Convention: Pas-i-Manzar, Rudad, Tajaviz-o-Faisale Aur Rabita-i-Madaris-i-Islamiya Ka Qayyam* (The All-India religious schools' convention, background, details, suggestions and decisions and the formation of a federation of Islamic schools') [henceforth, *Kul Hind*], (New Delhi: All-India Milli Council, n.d.), 3.

11. Mumshad 'Ali Qasmi, *Tarikh-i-Dars-i-Nizami* (The history of the Dars-i-Nizami) (Bilaspur: Majm'a al-Bahuth al-'Ilmiya, 1994), 48.

12. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darsgahe*, 45.

13. Mumshad Qasmi, *Tarikh-i-Dars-i-Nizami*, 45.

14. For a history of the Deoband Madrassa, see Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India 1860: 1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

and relied entirely on public donations. In the absence of the Muslim ruler as patron, it was now the ordinary Muslim, with whom the ulema had, until then, had few links, who came to symbolize the survival of Islam in the country. Thus, the founders of the Deoband madrassa made efforts to establish close links with ordinary Muslims in small towns and villages. A few years after its setting up, its graduates had established their own small madrassas in various parts of India, spreading the Deobandi teachings of Islamic reform. Consequently, the social composition of the madrassa student body began undergoing a noticeable change, as many young men from lower class, *ajlaf* families began enrolling in Deoband and the network of Islamic schools that it helped spawn. For these people, access to the cherished resources associated with the Islamic scripturalist tradition provided a means for upward social mobility in a society deeply stratified by caste. Further, the free education, board and lodging provided by the madrassas often attracted many poor Muslims who could not afford to study in schools that charged fees. The hope of getting employment as *muezzins*, imams and madrassa teachers, also attracted many poor Muslims with no other reasonable job prospects. On the other hand, middle class Muslims increasingly began to send their sons to modern, English-medium schools, as these provided avenues for occupations in the new economy. Thus, increasingly, and especially after 1947, the madrassas came to be associated with the lower classes, and today it is only very rarely that rich Muslims would send their children to such schools.

As for the syllabus, hostility toward British rule meant that modern knowledge was viewed with suspicion. It was felt that “worldly” knowledge might tempt students away from their pursuit of religion, and hence was to be approached with extreme caution. Although some of the leading founders of Deoband are said to have legitimized the acquisition of such knowledge for the sake of the “advancement of Islam,” it was not incorporated into the syllabus of the school.¹⁵ Deoband followed the basic structure of the Dars-i-Nizami, but

15. Muhammad Qasmi, *Dini Madaris Aur 'Asr-i-Hazir*, 47–48. According to one Indian *'alim*, the founders of the madrassa believed that while modern education was not to be shunned, since the government schools were providing it there was no need to duplicate the government's efforts, and that the madrassa should, therefore, focus only on *shari'i* subjects (Mufti Ziauddin, in *Kul Hind Dini Madaris Convention Souvenir* [henceforth, *Souvenir*] (New Delhi: All-India Milli Council, n.d.), 32.

made several modifications in the syllabus, by reducing the number of books on philosophy and logic and incorporating more texts on hadith, fiqh and tafsir. Efforts to introduce modern disciplines met with no success. Two years after the founding of the madrassa, in 1859, a committee of the leading ulema of Deoband suggested reducing the length of the course of study from ten to six years, which the madrassa agreed to. The rationale given was that by doing so, the students would be able to study in modern schools after they graduated.¹⁶ However, few, if any, actually did so. It is said that Maulana Qasim Nanotawi, the founder of the madrassa, had at one stage thought of introducing the teaching of English in the madrassa so the students could be trained to engage in missionary work among English-speaking people. This suggestion was, however, later ruled out.¹⁷

As a reaction to Deoband's perceived hostility toward modern subjects, the Nadwat-ul ulema was set up in Lucknow in 1892, to train ulema well versed in both the traditional Islamic as well as modern disciplines. Its rector, Shibli Nu'mani, sought to introduce the teaching of English, along with modern social and natural sciences, in the syllabus, arguing that the early Muslims had not desisted from taking advantage of the learning of the Greeks and the Iranians; Islam, he argued, being an eternal religion, had always been open to new developments in the realm of the 'aqli 'ulum. However, he encountered stiff opposition from the conservative ulema,¹⁸ some of whom branded him as a *kafir*. As a result, Nadwa failed in its mission to develop a new class of ulema, but Shibli's vision remained a powerful source of inspiration for reformers in post-1947 India.

Madrassa Reform in Present-day India

MUSLIM ADVOCATES OF REFORM in contemporary India include both trained ulema, products of madrassas, as well as men who have been educated in modern schools. Some of them have studied in madrassas and have then gone on to receive higher education in regular universities. While all of them seem agreed on the importance of the

16. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darogahe*, 119.

17. Ibid., 11. Qamruddin writes that in 1925 Deoband started a course in Sanskrit to train Muslim missionaries to work among Hindus but that it was soon abandoned.

18. Ibid., 42.

madrassas as institutions geared to preserving and promoting Islamic knowledge and Muslim identity, there is considerable variation in their approaches to the nature and extent of the reform they advocate. There seems, however, a consensus that the core of the reform project should consist of modification in the madrasa syllabus and the methods of teaching. This section looks at the ways in which these appeals for reform are articulated and expressed by these advocates of reform.

The rationale for introducing modern disciplines in the madrassas is framed in principally three ways. First, it is said to be in line with the Islamic understanding of knowledge as all embracing, covering both *'ibadat* (worship) as well as *mu'amilat* (social relations, worldly pursuits). Second, introducing modern disciplines is said to be essential in order for Muslims to prosper in this world, in addition to the next. Third, it is seen as essential in order for the ulema to engage in *tableeq*, or Islamic missionary work. All three tie in with a new, more activist understanding of the role of the ulema. The ulema are no longer to remain restricted to teaching in the madrassas. Rather, they are to play an important role as leaders of the community. Some writers stress that the ulema have, in fact, the divinely ordained responsibility of providing leadership to the entire world as leaders of the followers of the one true faith.

Islam and Knowledge

ADVOCATES FOR REFORM see the present syllabus used in the Indian madrassas—generally some variant of the Dars-i-Nizami—as stagnant, in many respects no longer in tune with the demands and needs of the times. Because the syllabus has remained largely the same for the last three centuries, with only minor modifications, the ulema are seen as rapidly losing their relevance for Muslim society, cocooned as they are in a world that has long since passed.¹⁹ The reformists insist that for the ulema to be able to play the role that Islam has envisaged for them, as guides of the community, the madrasa syllabus must be considerably revised. This entails a new understanding, said to be

19. Muhammad Arshad, "Azad Hindustan Mai Musalmano Ki Ta'limi Surat-i-Hal" (The educational conditions of Muslims in independent India), in Parwaz Rahmani and Muhammad Arshad, eds., *Hindustani Musalman* (The Indian Muslims) (New Delhi: Da'wat Publications, 2001), 101.

more Islamically authentic, of the place of knowledge and the role of the ulema in Islam.

Reformists insist that knowledge in Islam is one whole, and that the division between *dini* (religious) and *duniyavi* (worldly) knowledge, with the two opposed to each other, which many contemporary ulema seem to have accepted, has no sanction in the Quran.²⁰ The very first revelation to the Prophet, “Read, in the name of your Lord,” and the numerous hadith stressing the superiority of the scholar over the worshipper and the martyr, are said to indicate the great emphasis Islam gives to the acquisition of knowledge.²¹ The Quran is quoted as repeatedly exhorting the believers to ponder the mysteries of creation as signs of the power and mercy of God. Knowledge of the creation is said to be the means for acquiring knowledge of God.²² Thus, far from leading to doubt and disbelief, scientific investigation, if conducted within properly defined Islamic bounds, can deepen one’s faith and is, in fact, commanded so by God. The Prophet Muhammed is portrayed as the pioneer of universal literacy and education.²³ The circle of followers who learned the Quran from him, first in Mecca and then in Medina, formed the first Muslim “school.” Education was considered a duty (*farz*) binding on all Muslims, men as well as women, rich and poor.²⁴ The education imparted in the “schools” at the time of the Prophet was centered on the Quran, but the Prophet also encouraged his followers to gain worldly knowledge. This is suggested by the hadith, “Go unto even China in search of knowledge,” for China was renowned at that time for its advancement in various sciences. In addition, the Prophet is also known to have instructed some of his disciples to learn foreign languages, to communicate the message of Islam to non-Arab peoples, as well as other subjects such as mathematics and

20. Sayyed Abul Hasan ‘Ali Nadwi, *‘Ilm Ka Muqam Aur Ahl-i-‘ilm Ki Zimmedariyan* (The place of knowledge and the responsibilities of the intellectuals) (Lucknow: Majlis Tahqiqat-o-Nashriyat ul-Islam, 1997), 7.

21. Abdur Rauf Jhandanagari, *al-‘Ilm wa’l ulema* (Knowledge and the ulema) (Maunath Bhanjan: Idara Da’wat ul-Islam), 22. The author quotes a hadith to the effect that on the Day of Judgment, the light of the writings of the ‘*alim* would weigh as much as the blood of the martyr.

22. Shihabuddin Nadwi, *Hamare Talimi Masa’il* (Our educational problems) (Bangalore: Furqania Academy, 1989), 5.

23. Zafar ‘Alam, *Education in the Early Muslim Period* (New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba-i-Islami, 1997).

24. Arshad, “Azad Hindustan Mai Musalmano,” 97.

medicine.²⁵ Thus, following the Prophet, Muslims today must consider it a duty to acquire not only knowledge of the *shari'a* but also of the world (*duniya*).

Reformists argue that since Islam is all-embracing in its scope, providing guidance not only for worship and devotion but also rules for collective existence, ranging from personal affairs to matters of the state, Muslims must acquire knowledge of all aspects of the *duniya*, in addition to that of the *shari'a*. Since Islam is God's chosen religion and is valid for all times, the *ulema* must remain abreast with changing developments in the world to be able to express Islam anew in response to changing conditions.²⁶ It is only by acquiring knowledge of the modern world, of both the natural as well as the social sciences, that Islam, which is seen as a complete "system" (*nizam*), can be "implemented" in its entirety over all aspects of the Muslims' personal as well as collective affairs.²⁷ It is wrong, reformists argue, to consider that the sciences developed by people of other communities are necessarily un-Islamic and false. Indeed, they might contain much from which Muslims can benefit and can be used for the "cause of Islam," such as modern technology.²⁸ Hence, the *madrassas* should be willing to incorporate new knowledge in the realm of the natural and social sciences into their syllabus, provided these are in accordance with the teachings of Islam.²⁹

Since the conditions of the world are constantly changing, so, too, must the curriculum of the *madrassas* constantly evolve. While the core of the syllabus, consisting of the *naqli 'ulum*, should remain unchanged, its *aqli 'ulum* component—which is merely a means to acquiring knowledge of the *naqli 'ulum*—must be subject to revision

25. Sayyed Muhammad Salim, *Aghaz-i-Islam Mai Musalmano Ka Nizam-i-Ta'lim: Ahad-i-Banu Umayyaya Tak* (The system of education of the Muslims from the dawn of Islam until the age of the Umayyads) (Delhi: Markazi Maktaba-i-Islami, 1988), 30.

26. Abul 'Irfan Khan Nadwi, "Nisab-i-Ta'lim Aur Tariqa-i-Ta'lim: Maujuda Ahad Ke Taqaze" (The syllabus and method of education: the demands of the present age), *Islam Aur Asr-i-Jadid* 12, no. 4 (October 1980): 26.

27. Islam thus comes to be presented in reified terms, as a neatly defined body of knowledge, almost as a thing in itself.

28. Wahiduddin Khan, *ulema Aur Daur-i-Jadid* (The *ulema* and the modern age) (New Delhi: al-Risala, 1992), 42.

29. Iqbal Ahmad Ansari, "Dini Madaris ka Ta'limi Nizam" (The educational system of the religious schools) in *'Arabi Islami Madaris Ke Nisab-o-Nizam-i-Ta'lim* (The syllabus and system of education in Arabic Islamic schools) (Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1995), 156.

in accordance with the changing context.³⁰ The ulema must realize that the Dars-i-Nizami, the main syllabus used in most of the Indian madrassas, was itself prepared in and for a certain historical context, and since the context has changed, the syllabus can no longer remain stagnant, as has largely remained the case so far.³¹ This requires the introduction of modern subjects in the madrassas, and the deletion of books that are no longer valid and that were designed for a different age. In addition to issues of traditional fiqh that have no relation with the modern world (such as slavery), the present curriculum is said to teach many subjects that are of no contemporary use or relevance, such as Greek philosophy, which need to be replaced by modern equivalents.³²

The inclusion of “modern” subjects is said to be necessary in order to develop a new fiqh attuned to the particular context of contemporary India, for the old books of fiqh deal with many issues that are no longer relevant and are also silent about matters that modernity has forced people to deal with.³³ For this new Islamic jurisprudence, the focus of the teaching should shift from the details of jurisprudence (*fur'u*) to the principles of law (*'usul*). One writer even suggests that madrassas familiarize their students with international law and comparative legal systems, to “meet modern challenges.”³⁴ Since the traditional fiqh, which forms the foundation of the present madrasa syllabus, is lacking, in many respects, for a society that is no longer “closed and isolated,” the Indian ulema must go directly to the Quran to gain insights into how Islam can be expressed in contemporary terms.³⁵ Muslims must realize that past interpretations of Islam are not binding on them, for the classical interpreters were human beings after all, whose understanding of the scripture was heavily influenced by their own environment. While what is of value in their interpretations must not be shunned, the ulema today must approach the Quran

30. Muhammad Muhsin, “Dini Madaris ka Nisab” (The syllabus of the religious schools), in *'Arabi Islami Madaris*, 102.

31. Muhammad Salam Qasim, “Dars-i-Nizami Aur Islah-i-Nisab Ke 'Usul-o-Mabadi” (The Dars-i-Nizami and the principles of reform of the syllabus), in *'Arabi Islami Madaris*, 105.

32. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darsgahe*, 53.

33. Faruqi, *Musalmano Ka Ta'limi Nizam*, 86.

34. Muhammad Qasmi, *Dini Madaris Aur 'Asr-i-Hazir*, 29.

35. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darsgahe*, 140.

without blind reliance on the classical interpreters and seek to discover what message it has for the present, for it is a book with eternal validity.³⁶ Blind adherence to traditional fiqh (*taqlid*) as taught in the madrassas must be shunned, and a new class of ulema, with a knowledge of modern disciplines, must come to the fore who must engage in *ijtihad*, the creative interpretation of Islam in the light of modern conditions,³⁷ and thereby refute the allegations of Orientalists and others that Islam has no relevance to the present day.³⁸ This new fiqh must be contextually interpreted, taking into account the specific Indian context, where issues of religious pluralism, and the increased demands for women's emancipation and social justice for oppressed communities provide challenges for which traditional fiqhi formulations have no relevant answers.³⁹ In addressing these new issues, the ulema might need to work along with pious Muslims who have been trained in modern subjects and together come up with new solutions.⁴⁰

This advocacy of introducing modern learning, of course, does not mean an uncritical adoption of Western paradigms of scientific knowledge, especially in the social sciences. Reformists make a cautious distinction between the products of modern technology that, as they see it, could be used to serve the cause of Islam, and the underlying assumptions of Western science—materialism and skepticism in matters of religion, calling for what is now fashionably called the “Islamization of knowledge,” stressing the need for suitably “Islamized,” “modern” disciplines to be taught as “commentaries on various aspects of the Quran.”⁴¹

In the writings of the reformists, Islam's position on universal education is seen as setting it apart from and above all other religions. While other religions, such as Judaism and Hinduism, see knowledge as the close preserve of a small priesthood, Islam stresses the need

36. Muhammad Faruq Khan, “Quran ki Ta’limi aur Tadrisi Masa’il” (Educational and teaching matters related to the Quran), in *Dini Madaris Aur Unke Masa’il* (Madrassas and their problems) (Baleriyaganj: Jami’at-ul Falah, 1990), 14–16.

37. Abid Raza Bedar, preface to *‘Arabi Islami Madaris*, 5.

38. Ghulam Yahya Anjum, *Anwar-i-Khyal* (The lights of thought) (New Delhi, 1991), 120.

39. Fazlur Rahman Faridi, in *Kul Hind*, 86.

40. Muhammad ‘Uzair al-Mazhari, “Ladkiyon Ki ‘Ala Dini Ta’lim Ka Masla” (The question of girls’ higher religious education), in *Dini Madaris Aur Unke Masa’il*, 117.

41. Shihabuddin Nadwi, *Hamare Ta’limi Masa’il*, 10.

for all people, men as well as women, to acquire knowledge. The contrast with Christianity is repeatedly stressed. Christianity is said to be radically indifferent to worldly affairs, making a sharp distinction between what is Caesar's and what is God's, and thus between sacred and profane knowledge. Hence, the church is accused of having a fierce hostility toward science and reason and to have enjoyed a long history of persecuting scientists. In contrast to Christianity, the Quran does not enjoin blind faith but, rather, a faith based on reason ('*aq*). Further, unlike Christianity, Islam does not negate the world or advocate monasticism. Rather, it strikes a harmonious balance between this world and the next, and so positively encourages the cultivation of knowledge of the world and both worldly as well as spiritual welfare and progress.⁴² Hence, in contrast to the Christian world, scientific development occurred on a grand scale at a time when Islamic civilization was at its zenith, because of—rather than, as in the Christian case, despite—the deep-rooted influence of religion.⁴³ Thus, the great achievements of early medieval Muslim scientists, in a range of fields, including medicine, astronomy, physics, mathematics, biology and engineering, owed essentially to the encouragement provided by Islam to explore the duniya as a “sign” (*ayaat*) of God's majesty.⁴⁴ These scientists are said to have been pious Muslims, seeing their own scientific work as entirely in keeping with the teachings of Islam. It is also argued that the great universities of the medieval Muslim world provided inspiration and knowledge to European scientists at a time when Europe was still reeling under the Dark Ages and the church was vehemently opposed to science. Modern science is said to have its roots in the medieval Islamic tradition.⁴⁵ Hence, for present-day ulema to take to scientific education is not to abandon their faith or to embrace the alien. Rather, it is to claim what was once theirs, a return to their authentic roots. In fact, modern science, if studied cleansed of its “un-Islamic” associations, can only help to further strengthen the Muslims' faith in Islam. On the other hand, if the

42. Aslam Parwez, “Madaris Ke Nisab Aur Science” (The syllabus of the madrasas and science), in '*Arabi Islami Madaris*, 125.

43. Shihabuddin Nadwi, *Hamare Ta'limi Masa'il*, 3.

44. Ishtiaq Ahmad Zilli, in '*Arabi Islami Madaris*, 32.

45. Aftab Ahmad, “Madaris-i-'Arabiya Ka Nisab Aur Waqt Ki Zarurat” (The syllabus of the Arabic schools and the needs of the times'), in '*Arabi Islami Madaris*, 143.

ulema continue to ignore the importance of modern disciplines they would meet the same fate as the church in Europe, and the younger generation of Muslims would begin to turn away from Islam in the wrong belief that it is opposed to reason and worldly progress.⁴⁶

New Roles for the Ulema

SOME MUSLIMS WHO CALL FOR REFORM in the madrassa syllabus, stressing the need for introducing modern (*‘asri*) disciplines, consider it as essential for the activist role they see for the ulema, as deputies (*na’ib*) of the Prophet charged with the responsibility of leading the community, and, indeed, all mankind, in accordance with the Quranic injunction of “enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil.”⁴⁷ If the ulema are to be successful in that divinely appointed task, they must be aware of modern developments and thereby prove their value to the community. Armed with religious as well as modern knowledge, the ulema must play a central part in social reform, and also as social workers, struggling for justice for all humankind irrespective of religion.⁴⁸ Modern education, along with religious training, would enable madrassa products to “gain social prestige” and turn into “useful citizens.” Accordingly, madrassas must also teach new subjects that would enable their students to play a role in national development, such as the natural and social sciences, the philosophy of the Indian Constitution, civics, and the principles of social justice, human rights, justice, equality and freedom.⁴⁹ This would lead to a transformation in how the ulema see the rest of the world and how the world sees them. Because they are said to be cut off from the fast-changing world around them, the madrassa students, says one writer, “suffer from an intense inferiority complex, hating everybody with modern education and being hated by them, in turn.” If they were to prove their relevance and usefulness in the modern world, they would be able to recover for themselves the position that Islam gives them of guides of the community.⁵⁰

46. Shihabuddin Nadwi, *Hamare Ta’limi Masa’il*, 8.

47. ‘Abdur Rahman, quoted in *Souvenir*, 5.

48. Salamatullah, *Hindustan Mai Musalmano Ki Ta’lim* (The education of Muslims in India) (Delhi: Maktaba-i-Jami’a, 1990), 145.

49. Ansari, “Dini Madaris ka Ta’limi Nizam,” 165.

50. Moinuddin Ahmed, *Ulema: The Boon and Bane of Islamic Society* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1990), 105.

Madrassa Modernization and Worldly Progress

INTRODUCING MODERN SUBJECTS in the madrassas is also seen as providing Muslims with real-world benefits. Thus, a leading writer associated with the Jamaat-i-Islami argues, “to keep Muslims ahead of other communities, it is necessary to have worldly power, which is possible only through acquiring scientific and technical education.”⁵¹ Modernizing the curriculum is also seen as addressing a central problem for many madrassa graduates, that of employment in an economy for which they have little or no training. Typically, the ulema have responded to the question by dismissing it altogether. Madrassa students, they insist, should have no care for where and how they would earn their livelihood, for God shall provide for them.⁵² Some writers, however, recognize that employment is a fundamental concern for the students, most of who come from poor families, and are sent to the madrassas by their parents in the hope that on graduation they would be able to earn a livelihood as imams in mosques or teachers in maktabas and madrassas. They see the introduction of modern education as also helping to address the problem of acute unemployment among madrassa graduates, because, they argue, the existing avenues of employment for them, mainly as teachers in madrassas or imams and muezzins in mosques, are limited.⁵³ It would allow madrassa students to enter regular schools and colleges and thereby help the madrassas “become a part of the national education mainstream.”⁵⁴

Teaching “modern” subjects in the madrassas, the reformists contend, would also help bridge the gap between the ulema and the modern-educated Muslims, who are seen to have fallen prey to “un-Islamic” ideologies and ways of life. If the madrassas were to incorporate modern subjects into their curriculum they might also

51. Sultan Ahmad Islahi, *Madaris Mai Sciencī Ta’lim* (Scientific education in the madrassas) (Delhi: Markazi Maktaba-i-Islami, 1990), 6.

52. Muhammad Taqi Usmani, *Dini Madaris: Din Ki Hifazat Ke Qiley* (Religious schools: the forts for the defense of the faith) (Delhi: Farid Book Depot, 2000), 22–27. Usmani is a Pakistani Deobandi whose works have been widely published in India.

53. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darṣgahe*, 12.

54. Ansari, “Dini Madaris ka Ta’limi Nizam,” 162. Needless to say, many ulema react angrily to these suggestions, insisting that madrassa education must be acquired solely for the sake of God, untainted by desire for worldly gain.

succeed in attracting students from better-off families to enroll and thus not only help undermine the existing educational dualism, but also improve the standards of the madrassas and, as one *'alim* suggests, the moral standards of the students.⁵⁵ This is also seen as helping to rescue those Muslim children who are being subjected to a subtle policy of Hinduization and “intellectual apostasy” in the government schools.

Some writers see the reform process as ultimately aimed at completely doing away with the division between ulema and modern-educated Muslims, calling for a single, unified syllabus that represents a harmonious balance of *shari'i* and modern knowledge. In this way, pious Muslims would be trained to be masters of religious law, on the one hand, and doctors, engineers, sociologists, economists and so on, on the other, who would be “the envy of the world,” and help the community attain “success” in this world and in the next.⁵⁶

Madrassa Reform and Muslim Missionary Activism

INTRODUCING MODERN DISCIPLINES in the madrassa syllabus is also seen as central to the divinely ordained task of *tableeq*, or the preaching of Islam. Thus, it is repeatedly stressed that the eleventh-century Imam Ghazali (1058–1111), the most accomplished Islamic scholar of his times, studied Greek philosophy to refute those Muslims who had fallen prey to its snares and had dismissed religion as a human creation. By mastering Greek philosophy, he was able to refute its claims and establish the supremacy of Islam. Likewise, present-day ulema must closely study, indeed master, “un-Islamic” philosophies, not for their own sake, but to expose them and assert the truth of Islam. A new science of Islamic theology (*'ilm ul kalam*) is called for, one that seeks to present Islam in contemporary terms in order to appeal to the modern mind. For this, the ulema must be familiar with various contemporary ideologies and knowledge systems that are opposed to Islam.⁵⁷ By teaching these subjects, the madrassas would help train what one leading Indian *'alim* calls “an ideal ideological army” whose task would be to “defeat all other religions and ways of

55. Shihabuddin Nadwi, *Hamare Ta'limi Masa'il*, 19–20.

56. Anjum, *Anwar-i-Khyal*, 123.

57. Shihabuddin Nadwi, *Hamare Ta'limi Masa'il*, 15.

life,”⁵⁸ and to “wage war against falsehood.”⁵⁹ Numerous writers suggest that the teaching of comparative religions should be introduced in the madrassas to equip the students with tools to rebut the upholders of other faiths. Some argue that students need to be taught to use computers and the Internet to engage more fruitfully in tableeq work. The need for studying English and other “non-Muslim” languages is stressed as indispensable for successful tableeq and for countering anti-Islamic writings in these languages.⁶⁰ While some writers see the tableeq project in terms of a battle against people of other faiths by dismissing their faiths as false, others argue that the ulema, trained in modern subjects and armed with a knowledge of other religions, must seek to promote peace, love, dialogue and harmony with people of other communities, for it is only in a climate of tolerance that others would be willing to listen to the appeal of Islam.⁶¹

It is also argued that if the ulema, as leaders of the Muslims, fail to take to modern education, the community would fall behind other communities and be turned into helpless victims. The strength of the contemporary West is said to lie in its command over knowledge, and the ulema are exhorted to follow its examples if they are to establish the Muslims as leaders of the world, intellectually as well as economically, politically and militarily.⁶² If Muslims were to lead the world in the development of knowledge, others would accept their leadership and follow them, and might even be inspired to convert to Islam. By mastering modern knowledge, the ulema would, it is said, also be able to impress on the non-Muslims that Islam has the perfect solution for all worldly problems, and this might inspire them to accept the true faith.⁶³

58. Ibid., 10.

59. Ibid., 19.

60. Syed Shahabuddin Dasnavi, “Madrassa System: Chand Mashvare” (Madrassa system: some suggestions), in *‘Arabi Islami Madaris*, 25. While the “other” is seen, typically, as “the enemy of Islam,” and tableeq is described in combative terms, some writers stress the need for a change in how Muslims look at others. One ‘alim calls for introducing modern disciplines in the madrassas to help equip Muslims to “dialogue through serious and scientific discussion” with other people, “viewing them not as enemies but as seekers of the truth,” who are to be approached with “love and concern,” and “words of compassion.” See Wahiduddin Khan, *al-Risala*, no. 286 (September 2000): 27–29.

61. Mohsin Usmani Nadwi, “Madaris Ka Nizam-i-Ta’lim Aur Naya Challenge” (The system of madrassa education and the new challenge), *Islam Aur ‘Asr-i-Jadid* 32, no. 4 (October 2000): 107–08.

62. Shihabuddin Nadwi, *Hamare Ta’limi Masa’il*, 8.

63. Nazir al-Hafiz, *‘Arabi Islami Madaris*, 38.

The Limits of Reform

ADVOCATES FOR THE INTRODUCTION of modern subjects in the madrassa curriculum are aware of the limits of reform, but there is considerable debate about how far reform should proceed. This tension centers on the perceived role and function of the madrassa. Those who see madrassas as aimed at only training students for professional religious posts argue that modern subjects should be allowed only insofar as they might help their students understand and interpret Islam in the light of modern education.⁶⁴ Others, recognizing that not all the graduates of the madrassas might be able or even want to become professional ulema, have suggested the creation of two streams of education in the madrassas. In the first stream, students who want just a modicum of religious education and then go on to join regular schools, would be taught basic religious subjects along with modern disciplines. The second stream would cater to students who wish to train as professional ulema, and would focus on *shari'i* subjects, teaching modern disciplines only to the extent necessary for them to interpret Islam in the light of modern needs.⁶⁵ A vocal minority insists, on the other hand, that an entirely new system of education must take the place of the traditional madrassas, where a unified syllabus, based on a harmonious blend of *shari'i* and modern subjects would be taught in equal proportions, and whose graduates could go on to train for a range of occupations, both religious as well as other, including joining the government bureaucracy, which would not only give them a source of gainful employment but would also, it is said, afford them an opportunity of engaging in tableeq among non-Muslims.⁶⁶ Some go so far as to suggest that the larger madrassas, after being suitably reformed, be converted into universities, funded by but autonomous of, the government of India, with the smaller madrassas being affiliated with them, following in the path of madrassas in many Muslim countries. This, however, is not a widely shared view.⁶⁷

64. Anzar Shah Kashmiri, in *'Arabi Islami Madaris*, 36.

65. Aftab Ahmad, "Madaris-i-'Arabiya Ka Nisab Aur Waqt Ki Zarurat" (The syllabus of the Arabic schools and the needs of the times), in *'Arabi Islami Madaris*, 144.

66. Nishar Ahmad Faruqi, in *'Arabi Islami Madaris*, 65.

67. Sultan Ahmad Islahi, *Hindustan Mai Madaris-i-'Arabiya Ke Masa'il* (The problems of the Arabic madrassas in India) (Aligarh: Idara 'Ilm-o-Adab, n.d.), 152.

Reforms in Teaching Methods

BESIDES REFORMS IN THE CURRICULUM of the madrassas, reformists also argue for suitable changes in the methods of teaching. Many writers are critical of the current stress on parroting entire sections of books without exercising reason or critical thought, as a result of which few students are said to actually properly comprehend what they are taught.⁶⁸ Critics see the madrassas as discouraging debate, dialogue and critical reflection,⁶⁹ and as treating their students as passive students, thus cultivating a climate of stern authoritarianism.⁷⁰ The stress on bookish learning is said to have deflected attention from moral development, and some writers bewail what they see as the low moral standards of many madrassa students. One 'alim laments the charged polemics that madrassas train their students in, remarking that instead of teaching them how to engage in "peaceful and scientific dialogue" with people of other faiths, treating them as "enemies" rather than with "love and concern," they train them in "heated debate," although this is said to be against the practice of the Prophet.⁷¹ Another writer points out that madrassa teachers refuse to let their students read any literature outside the syllabus, and that this narrows the vision of the students. This, he says, is opposed to Islam's stress on general knowledge and its openness to learning.⁷² He argues the need for madrassas to interact with the wider society, even going so far as to suggest that they should invite non-Muslims to their meetings, and strive to establish peaceful relations with them, enlightening them about Islam and working with them for peaceful coexistence.⁷³ It is only by integrating with the wider society, including non-Muslims, and by being willing to learn from others, including from people of other faiths, suggests a Muslim critic, himself a madrassa graduate, that madrassa students can broaden their horizons and develop a proper contextual and relevant understanding of the faith.⁷⁴

68. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darsgahe*, 118.

69. Salamatullah, *Hindustan Mai Musalmano Ki Ta'lim*, 185.

70. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darsgahe*, 149.

71. Wahiduddin Khan, *al-Risala*, no. 286 (2000): 29.

72. Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darsgahe*, 53.

73. *Ibid.*, 307.

74. Washim Ahmad, "Psychology of Education: Madrassas of UP," *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 2000, 25-31, <http://www.epw.org.in/35-13/comm5.htm>.

Overall, then, the rationale for introducing modern disciplines in the madrasa syllabus is framed in terms of defense, staving off the creeping influence of other faiths or ideologies, or, in terms of the Islamic mission, as equipping the ulema to establish the “superiority” of Islam over other religions. It can be seen as a growing realization on the part of the ulema that unless changes are brought about in the system of madrasa teaching, the madrassas would lose their relevance and the influence of the ulema, as guardians of the Islamic scripturalist tradition, would further decline.

The Pace of Reform

THE ACTUAL PACE OF REFORM in the madrasa system in India has been slow and halting. Many madrassas have drastically reduced the number of books on antiquated Greek philosophy and logic in their syllabus, and have replaced them with more books on hadith and other *naqli ‘ulum*. In recent years, several madrassas, including even the archconservative Deoband, have introduced the teaching of modern subjects, including basic English, and elementary social and natural sciences, along with Hindi and, in some cases, a regional language in their syllabus,⁷⁵ but the standard of teaching leaves much to be desired. Recently, the Deoband Madrasa launched English and computer courses for selected students. The Markaz-ul Ma’arif in New Delhi, affiliated to the Deoband, trains fifteen Deobandi graduates every year in computer applications, English and comparative religions. Some of its graduates are now running social work centers, providing medical and educational assistance to poor children, particularly in northeast India, thus charting out a new role for socially engaged ulema.⁷⁶ Certain madrassas, such as the Jami’at ul-Huda (Jaipur), the Madrasa Falah-i-Dara’in (Surat) and the Jami’a Sabil-us Salaam (Hyderabad) have also introduced technical training into their curriculum, thus providing their students alternate sources of employment. Some larger madrassas have managed to secure

75. Atiq-ur Rahman and Muhammad Shah Jahan Qasmi, “Hindustan Ke Aham Dini Madaris Ke Nisab-i-Ta’lim: Ek Taqabli Ja’iza” (The syllabus of India’s important religious schools: A comparative study), in *‘Arabi Dini Madaris*, 187–206.

76. S. Ubaidur Rahman, “Markaz-ul Ma’arif: A Shining Example,” *Milli Gazette*, 16–28 February 2002, 11.

recognition of their degrees by certain government-funded universities, such as the Aligarh Muslim University (Aligarh), the Osmania University (Hyderabad), the Jami'a Millia Islamiya and the Jami'a Hamdard (New Delhi), which allows their graduates to enter the universities at the master's level. In this way, these madrassas are being enabled to enter the educational mainstream. However, the number of madrassa students who manage to join universities is still abysmal, estimated, according to one source, at only fifty each year.⁷⁷

Efforts to reform madrassas have also been attempted by some state governments, and, as in Pakistan today, the Government of India has also been pressing for the modernization of madrassas. The government has been increasingly trying to regulate the functioning of the madrassas, seeing them in terms of a security threat. This approach has been further strengthened with the active involvement of students of Deoband madrassas in Pakistan in the Taliban movement, and the growing radicalization of many madrassas in Pakistan. Fears have been expressed and accusations have been made of certain Indian madrassas emerging as "hideouts" and "breeding centers" of Islamist "radicals," although evidence for this seems lacking. The autonomy of the madrassas is seen as a particular challenge by the state, for this is seen as leaving the madrassas open to radical Islamists who might use them to challenge the state and promote Islamist militancy. Hence, reform of the madrassas through modernization is seen as a means to prevent the madrassas from emerging as centers of oppositional Islamist activity, and, by many Muslims themselves, as a subtle way to wean the Muslims away from their faith.

Government appeals for modernization of the madrassas seem to rest on the premise that the madrassas are meant to be institutions for the general education of Muslims and, therefore, must meet the generally accepted standards for modern schools to enable their students to enter the mainstream.⁷⁸ Hence, the need for madrassas to

77. Hakim Sayyed Muhammad Hasnan Nagrami, "Farighin-i-Madaris-i-'Arabiya ka Mustaqbil" (The future of the graduates of the Arabic schools), in *'Arabi Islami Madaris*, 183.

78. The government's case for the reform and modernization of madrassas to enable Muslims to enter the educational mainstream of the country puts the onus of Muslim educational backwardness largely on the madrassas themselves. This argument seems specious, at best, and the concern of the government with the madrassas clearly

introduce modern subjects in their syllabus is stressed. This view clashes with that of the ulema, who see the madrassas as institutions meant for the preservation of Islamic knowledge and for the training of ulema. Hence, they insist that the teaching of modern subjects, if allowed, must be strictly subordinate to that of religious subjects. This differing perception of the role of the madrassas—along with the fear that the introduction of modern subjects would lead to an undermining of the authority of the ulema as interpreters of the faith—accounts in large measure for the distinct lack of enthusiasm on the part of most madrassas for the madrasa modernization programs of the state and central governments.

In India today, the governments of five states—West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Uttar Pradesh—have set up Boards of Madrasa Education that frame the syllabus of madrassas affiliated with them, consisting of both traditional Islamic as well as modern subjects. The boards also conduct the examinations, enabling the students to join secular schools after graduation. This has been welcomed by some, but others argue that in this way the religious content of the syllabus has been considerably watered down and that, burdened with the need to learn both religious as well as modern subjects, the students do well in neither.⁷⁹

In recent years, the Government of India, as well as some state governments, has launched some small schemes ostensibly to assist some madrassas, such as providing them paid teachers to teach modern subjects. These efforts have, however, failed to make much of an impact, and only a few smaller madrassas have taken advantage of these schemes, for fear of government interference and control, which they see—and probably rightly so—as aimed at weakening their Islamic identity by introducing the teaching of government-prescribed books

appears motivated by other factors. If promoting Muslim education was indeed a primary concern of the government, it should have paid more attention to setting up more modern schools in Muslim localities, which it has failed to do. In fact, the level of educational provision by the state in Muslim areas is far below the level of other, particularly Hindu, areas, leaving the state open to charges of discrimination against Muslims. Then again, proposals to legitimize government involvement in the running of the madrassas on the grounds of helping to modernize them seem hollow in the face of what is today a concerted effort on the part of the Indian state to Hinduize the education system, including introducing subjects such as astrology and Hindu rituals and mythology in the syllabus in schools and colleges.

79. Khalid Saifullah Rahmani, in *Kul Hind*, 76.

in the social sciences, which generally betray a heavy Hindu and often anti-Muslim slant.⁸⁰ Many ulema associated with the madrassas see the efforts by the state to reform them as a subtle means of Hinduization, for if modern subjects were to overwhelm and marginalize traditional Islamic subjects, the religious identity of the madrassas, seen as the “forts of Islam,” would be effectively undermined, and the road cleared for absorbing the Muslims into the Hindu fold.⁸¹

Madrassas under Siege?

TODAY, OFFICIAL CIRCLES, fiercely anti-Muslim Hindutva groups and large sections of the Indian press seem to have mounted a concerted campaign to dismiss the madrassas not just as bastions of conservatism and reaction but also as training grounds for Islamic “terrorists.”⁸² This climate of hostility seems to have worked to further heighten the suspicions of the madrassas and has made the effort to reform them even more difficult.⁸³ In February 2001, the Indian government brought out a document prepared by the Group of Ministers on National Security, alleging that madrassas, particularly in some border regions, were working in league with “pan-Islamist militant outfits” and “radical organizations” in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and some other West Asian states. It suggested that some of them were engaging in “indoctrination of Muslims in [...] fundamentalist ideology,” which, it said, had grave implications for inter-communal relations and for the stability of the state.⁸⁴ In the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001, attacks on

80. For instance, the suggestion that *madrassa* introduce the teaching of what is called “Vedic Mathematics.” See Nizam Elahi, *Modernisation of Madrasa Education Scheme in India* (Delhi: State Council for Educational Research and Training, 2001), 21.

81. One prominent Indian Muslim politician even suggests that the real purpose of the government’s proposals for modernization of madrassas is to “monitor what goes on inside the madrassas through a government-funded monitor in the form of a teacher of English, mathematics and sciences.” (Syed Shahabuddin, quoted in Madhav Godbole, “Madrassas: Need for a Fresh Look,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 October 2001, 3890.

82. Thus, for instance, in June 2002 a leading Hindu fascist organization, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) demanded a ban on madrassas, alleging that hundreds of thousands of “fundamentalist students of the Taliban variety are churned out” from these institutions.

83. Mujahidul Islam Qasmi, in *Kul Hind*, 12.

84. Quoted in M. Saud Alam, “Modernisation of Madrasa Education,” *Radiance Viewsweekly*, 3–9 March 2002, 9.

the madrassas in the Indian press have mounted. Madrassas have been branded as centers of anti-national, pro-Pakistan propaganda, allied with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, and as dens of Islamic “terrorism.” The state has sought to introduce new laws to monitor to growth and functioning of madrassas, particularly in the border areas, and is considering legislation to regulate funding to them,⁸⁵ on the grounds that they might be being used as hideouts of “anti-national” elements, although the government has failed to come up with any solid evidence of these claims,⁸⁶ even in the case of the madrassas in Kashmir.⁸⁷ Some madrassas have been raided by the Indian police, and staff and students have been harassed.

Faced with increasing opposition from militant Hindu groups and large sections of the Indian press and the suspicion of the state, Indian madrassas have had to deal with charges of lending support to radical Islamist movements in Kashmir, Pakistan and Afghanistan, many of whose activists are madrassa students. On the whole, the Indian madrassas have responded by denying any links with these movements, stressing instead their “secular” and “patriotic” credentials, pointing out the great role of the ulema in the freedom movement against the British, opposing the “two-nation” theory of the Muslim League, and preaching harmony between Hindus and Muslims.⁸⁸ In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, as madrassas came under increasing attack in India from right-wing Hindu organizations and leading sections of the Indian press, the largest and most influential madrassa in India, the Dar-ul-Ulum at Deoband, was moved to firmly deny any organizational links with the Taliban or with other radical Islamist organizations. In June 2002, the rector of the madrassa, Maulana Marghub ur-Rahman, issued a statement insisting that persons belonging to madrassas and religious institutions in Pakistan or elsewhere engaged in promoting terrorism against India were “outside the scope of ideals.” It declared that

85. “No Survey on Foreign Funds to Border Area Madrassas,” *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 18 May 2002.

86. Yoginder Sikand, “Madrassas: Escalating Witch-Hunt,” *Meantime*, 15 September 2001, 26–29; Sikand, “Targeting Religious Schools,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1 September 2001, 3342–43; S. Ubaidur Rahman, “Nepal-border Madrassas: No Iota of ‘Terrorism’ or ‘ISI’ Activity,” *Milli Gazette*, 16–31 July 2001, 4.

87. “Kashmir Madrassas Have Not Produced a Single Terrorist,” *Milli Gazette*, June 1–15, 2002.

88. See, for example, the statement by Maulana Abdullah Mughisi, secretary of the department of religious education of the All-India Milli Council, in *Souvenir*, 15.

clearly “elements promoting or abetting violence and terrorism against Islamic teachings cannot be Deobandis,” even if they claimed to be so. True Islam, the maulana insisted, demanded that Muslims be patriotic, abstain from harming or killing innocent people and generally lead a pious life. The founders of the madrassa, he stressed, had exhorted Muslims to work for the unity of India and for harmony between people of different faiths.⁸⁹ This denial of links with radical Islamists does not necessarily mean, however, that Deoband was necessarily opposed to their broader agenda of an Islamic state, in Afghanistan or Pakistan, but only that it was opposed to the violent actions of some Islamist groups in and against India, seeing this as harmful to the interests of the Indian Muslims, living as they do as an increasingly beleaguered minority. Thus, leading ulema of Deoband have admitted they did support the Taliban in its opposition to America and generally welcomed its policies that aimed at establishing a Deobandi-style Islamic state in Afghanistan.⁹⁰ In this way, the Deobandi ulema have sought to chart an uneasy balance between supporting the aims of the Taliban and dismissing reports of actually assisting it.⁹¹ To equate the Indian madrassas with the Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan, as the Indian government seems to be doing, is, however, misleading, for the contexts in which they operate are totally different. In Pakistan, the madrassas were supplied with liberal

89. “Deoband Ex-Communicates Believers in Violence,”

<http://www.milligazette.com/Archives/15072002/1507200259.htm>

90. On Osama bin Laden, leading Indian Deobandi ulema are said to believe that he was engaged in a jihad, but argued only those Muslims living in the lands controlled by him and the Taliban could participate in the war in Afghanistan. The Indian Muslims, they maintained, must support Osama, but only through “legal” means, and must pray for his success. They laid down that it was not allowed for Indian Muslims to actually travel to Afghanistan to participate in the jihad. Absolving Osama of all charges of terrorism, arguing that his only concern was to establish a “true” Islamic state in Afghanistan, they insisted that America was “the greatest terrorist state in the world.” They exhorted the Indian Muslims to undermine American interests, but, again, only through “legal and constitutional means,” such as boycotting American goods (Shahbaz Nadwi, “Deoband Se Taliban Tak: Akabir-i-ulema-i-Deoband Kya Kahtey Hain?” (From Deoband to the Taliban: what do the elders of Deoband say?), *Atkar-i-Milli*, December 2001, 33–35.

91. Thus, the head of the Deoband madrassa (Waqf), Maulana Salam Qasmi argued that the decisions taken by the Taliban had no bearing on the Muslims of India. Another leading ‘alim of the madrassa, Maulana Nur ‘Alam Amini, insisted that Deoband still adhered to its long-held position of “supporting secularism and a composite nationalism” in India, and asserted, “in the event of a war between India and Pakistan, we would support India.” He admitted that the madrassa did support the Taliban, on religious grounds, but differed with it on its understanding of the question

patronage by the state churning out students to participate in the American-assisted Afghanistan jihad.⁹² In India, on the other hand, the madrassas have no such access to funding and armed training.

In the present climate of hostility and suspicion, the agenda of reforming the madrassas has become particularly difficult, as suggestions for reform are easily dismissed as “anti-Islamic” ploys aimed at weakening what are called “the forts of Islam.”⁹³ Besides the current wave of attacks on the madrassas in India, other factors make the task of reform more difficult. Given the fact that almost all their teachers and students now come from lower and lower-middle class backgrounds⁹⁴ and that they remain largely insulated from the developments in the wider society, the need for reform is not felt as urgently as it should be. Reform is also seen as threatening their privileges and their position as sole interpreters of normative Islam. The existence of fierce differences of school of thought and sect has made it impossible for the setting up of an all-India body to regulate the policies and activities of the schools, and efforts to do so in the past have all failed. Almost all madrassas are administratively independent, which means that efforts at reform have so far been scattered and sporadic. Madrassas that wish to introduce modern subjects often lack the necessary funds and trained teachers. To add to this, the growing persecution of Muslims in India can only make madrassas even more defensive and impervious to change, and might even make talk of Islamic “terror” in madrassas a self-fulfilling prophecy.

of jihad against India. On the question of the war between the Taliban and the United States, these Deobandi ulema insisted that it was a legitimate Islamic jihad because America had allegedly launched a war against Islam and has attacked Afghanistan without proper justification, but pointing out that it is not binding on Muslims other than the Afghans to participate in it. The argument that all the Muslims of the world must participate in the jihad was dismissed as “an extremist position.” The other Muslims must assist the Afghans in their jihad against America, they advised, but only through “constitutional and legal means.” To talk of launching jihad in India, they stressed, was “against all wisdom” and could only be “counter-productive” (Ibid., 33–35).

92. Iqbal Khattak, “U.S. Allowed Growth of Seminaries as Part of Bleed-Russia Strategy,” *Friday Times*, Lahore, <http://thefridaytimes.com/news3a.htm>.

93. Thus, government and Hindu propaganda about the madrassas are seen as aimed at destroying the identity and faith of the Muslims, for, as the ulema see it, madrassas are the guarantor and the “fort” of Islam in India, and “weapons against un-Islamic forces” (Muhammad Baqr Hussain Qasmi, in *Souvenir*, 7; Sayyed Hamid, “Dini Madaris Ka Nizam-i-Ta’lim” (The system of education in religious schools), *Islam Aur ‘Asr-I-Jadid* 32, no. 4 (October 2000): 59.

94. A leading Indian ‘alim estimates that 99 percent of madrasa students come from poor families, who send their students to them not for the sake of acquiring knowledge but in the hope of future economic gain (Mujahidul Qasmi, in *Kul Hind*, 17).