CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION: THE CASE OF PAKISTAN

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The state of both secular and religious education in Pakistan has been a subject of review, evaluation, and criticism on numerous occasions. Over the years, each new government has put forward its own ideas to reform the educational system of the country and to bring it in line with its own socio-economic philosophy and political goals. Beginning with the November 1947 All Pakistan Educational Conference which recommended that education should be inspired by Islam and particularly by the Islamic ideals of universal brotherhood, tolerance and justice, there have been at least two dozen special commissions and committees which have studied the question of educational reform and have all emphasized that the basic orientation of Pakistani education should be Islamic.

One question that has not been adequately resolved by the educational planners and policy makers in Pakistan is that of the inveterate dichotomy and deep-seated alienation between the secular and religious educational institutions in the country. In the past, Muslim India had its own well-organized and highly sophisticated system of education - the madrasa system - which combined both religious and professional training in a framework defined by Islamic world-view. The system comprised of thousands of mosques and maktabas throughout the Muslim India which served as elementary schools along with hundreds of madrasa for intermediate and higher levels of education. These madrasas, besides teaching purely religious subjects such as tafsir, hadith and fiqh
also included grammar, rhetoric, logic, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine in their curriculum. One important measure of success of this system of education was that despite frequent changes in the dynasties who ruled India from the tenth to the eighteenth centuries, it continued to sustain the Muslim rule by producing a sufficient number of qualified persons to man the administrative cadres of the state (Mohiuddin, 1985:61). Coupled with the Muslim political power, this system of education also served as a backbone of Islamic culture in India. It provided the Muslim community with a powerful religious leadership; created a sense of unity and solidarity among the Muslims in a societal context where Hindus were in majority; and imbued the Muslims with a deeper consciousness of Islam as a religion, a way of life, and a philosophy (Ziaul Haq, 1972:1).

However, since the inception of the colonial administration in the nineteenth century and the subsequent introduction of modern secular educational institutions, the traditional Islamic educational system has lost its primacy in matters of state, economy and society. The system of education established by the British and later inherited by the independent state of Pakistan in 1947 became the dominant mode of education and training and continues to remain dominant even today. The traditional Islamic educational institutions, which today for the most part exist in the periphery of Pakistani society and economy, have nevertheless, continued to function in their own limited sphere. Instead of operating as an integral part of the core institutions of society, their functional significance has been reduced to serving merely as seminaries where, to use the Christian terminology, priests and clerics are produced to supervise and conduct religious services and rituals. Devoid of either public financial assistance or any relevance to the needs of a society
embarked on the path of socio-economic modernization, the madrassa have come to be regarded as doctrinally rigid, intellectually superficial, organizationally archaic, and socially cliquish.

There are about 1745 madrassa in Pakistan today (Halepota, 1979:47). In terms of level of education, the madrassa can be categorized as (1) *ibtedai* (elementary), where only the Quran is memorized and taught; (2) *vustani* (middle level), where selected books from *dars-i-Nizami* (the traditional Nizami curriculum) are taught; and (3) *fauqani* (higher level), where the entire *dars-i-Nizami* is taught. In some madrassa where competent ulama are available, students are also encouraged to take up specialized courses of study in *tafsir, hadith, or fiqh*.

*Dars-i-Nazami* which is prevalent in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent is not the same which is associated with the name of Mulla Nasiruddin Tusi (D.1064) and the Madrassa Nizamia which he established in the eleventh century Baghdad. The curriculum taught in the Indo-Pakistan madrassa was introduced by Mulla Nizamuddin Sihalvi (d.1747) who was a scholar of some repute in jurisprudence and philosophy. Most of the Sunni madrassa, irrespective of whether they are of *Deobandi, Brelvi* or *Ahle-Hadith* persuasion, follow the same Nizami curriculum which consists of about eighty books in twenty subject areas. The subject areas include grammar, rhetoric, prosody, logic, philosophy, Arabic literature, and dialectical theology, life of the Prophet, medicine, mathematics, polemics, Islamic law, jurisprudence, *hadith*, and *tafsir*. It is important to note that out of the twenty subjects only eight could be considered as purely religious. The remaining subjects are otherwise secular subjects which were included in Nizami curriculum both to equip the student for civil service jobs and as an aid to the understanding of religious texts. Also, facilities for teaching all of the subjects and books are not usually available in every madrassa. This is particularly true in case of subjects such as medicine, mathematics, history, prosody, and polemics. The result is that
the students often have to move from one madrassa to another to complete their curriculum. This also results in the failure of many madrassa to institutionalize their grading and promotion procedures.

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 a text written in the eleventh century and is still considered an authentic study of human anatomy and pathology. In what we have described as purely religious subjects, the books used date back to the seventeenth century at the latest and eleventh century at the earliest.

In most of the madrasas there are no formal admission procedures and academic schedules are often flexible. Some major madrasas have, however, institutionalized their admission, grading and promotion procedures and have established some degree of rigor in their academic schedules. The complete Nizami curriculum runs from seven to nine years after the completion of elementary level. The entire system is supported by the community through trusts, endowments, donations, and zakat contributions. Since the introduction of the compulsory collection of zakat and ushr by the present government, however, a large number of madrasas are receiving regular financial assistance from the publicly-administered zakat funds. Not only that the students do not have to pay any tuition but they are provided with free text books, board and lodging and a modest amount of stipend as well.

There were close to one hundred thousand students in the madrasas in 1979 in Pakistan (Halepota, 1979:58). This represents a phenomenal growth when compared with the number of students in 1970 which was 54,166 (Ahmad, 1976:24). Majority of the students belong to the rural areas of the North West Frontier Province, Azad Kashmir, and the depressed regions of Punjab.
They are mostly drawn from the lower strata of society. In a survey conducted in 1976, more than eighty percent madrassa students in Peshawar, Multan and Gujranwala were found to be sons of small or landless peasants, rural artisans and village imams of the mosques. The remaining twenty percent came from families of small shop keepers and rural laborers (Ahmad, 1976:17)

One must also note here that madrassa education has been and remains one of the surest paths of social mobility for many of the lower-level occupational castes of rural areas in Pakistan. Whatever occupational background the students might have come from, upon the completion of their madrassa education, they are sure to take a step forward in the hierarchy of social stratification, in terms of both income and social status. Thus the social significance of madrassa education lies not only in the fact that it imparts religious education to a large number of students every year but also in its contribution toward preparing them for an assured job market. It has been observed that while there is a considerable unemployment among the youth educated in secular schools and colleges, the graduates of madrasas have never faced such problems and have always found jobs commensurate with their training (Thanvi, n.d. :186-200). A survey in 1979 showed that among the graduates of 1978 class of the two major madrasas of Karachi and one in N.W.F.P., only six percent were still unemployed by the middle of 1979 (Ahmad, 1980:25).

With the exception of a few madrasas managed by the provincial government *Auqaf* departments, madrassa education in Pakistan is mainly in the private sector. In majority of cases, madrasas are personal enterprises of prominent ulama who own and manage them, and make arrangements for their finances. Usually the founders of the madrasas are ulama of good standing who have a degree of influence in the local community which enables them to acquire land, housing facilities, and financial resources for the madrassa. Most of the madrasas are registered with the
government as charitable corporate bodies and have acquired tax-exempt status, thus receiving an indirect subsidy from the public treasury. Some larger madrasas have their own board of trustees or executive committees which consist of local business elite, landed gentry and prominent ulama. In most cases, these are merely ceremonial bodies, meant largely to provide authenticity, decorum and legitimacy to the madrassa. Major policy decisions regarding doctrinal preferences, curriculum, and selection of teachers and students remain the exclusive prerogative of the ulama only.

Madrassa education has been a subject of constant critique and evaluation by the Muslim reformers, modernists, neo-fundamentalist revivalists, public policy makers and the ulama themselves. As a result of this, there have been many attempts to introduce changes in the traditional system of Islamic education. Among the traditional ulama, Shibli Nomani, Maulana Abul Muhsan, Maulana Abdul Aziz Rahimabadi, Maulana Sanaullah Amratsari, Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Osmani and Maulana Masud Alim Nadvi have written extensively on the need for reforms in madrasa education. However, their efforts have been limited to replacing a few old text books with newer ones and adding or dropping a few subjects. They did not question the structural parameters of madrasa system and its social uses in the material means of cultural reproduction. The modernist critique has been more fundamental and radical. They consider the entire system as retrogressive, reactionary and antithetical to the needs of the modern Muslim society (Rahman, 1982:59-69). Most devastating critique of the madrassa education, however, has come from the neo-fundamentalist revivalists like Abul Ala Maududi (D.1979). He considers the system as based on an uncritical study and memorization of antiquated texts through a perfunctory and mechanical methodology. The result is, Maududi observes, that the system has failed to stimulate any imaginative and creative intellectual thought among its students (Maududi, 1974:70). The madrassa education is also based
on the belief that theological formulations and intellectual achievements of earlier Islamic scholars cannot be subjected to any criticism or change and should be considered as a priori truth. It lacks empirical bases, critical insights, analytic tools, and creative content (Maududi, 1974:71-72).

According to Maududi, graduates of our madrasas can neither correctly represent Islam nor can they apply Islamic teachings to the problem of the modern life. Thus, they remain simply incapable of providing intellectual leadership to the community. On the contrary, they have become a major source of sectarian strife and disunity in the Ummah today (Maududi, 1974:127).

Maududi’s main criticism of the traditional system of Islamic education is that it is a misnomer to call these madrassas as religious schools. The system of education and curriculum in these schools is not religious at all; it is geared to the needs of the civil service of the medieval Muslim governments. It lost its practical utility on the day when the British took over India; since then it has been kept alive to fulfill some of our religious needs (Maududi, 1962:6).

Like modernists (e.g. Rahman, 1982, 46-47, 69, 91), Maududi considers the co-existence of dual systems of religious and secular education as un-Islamic and suggests that both religious and secular fields of knowledge should be integrated in a single system of education based on the Islamic theory of the unity of knowledge.

From the establishment of Nadvatul Ulama up to the reorganization of Jamia Islamia Bahawalpur, attempts made so far to integrate the two systems have not been very successful. For the ulama, the primary significance of madrassa education lies in its being the most effective vehicle for preserving their traditional heritage. For the modernists and public policy makers, madrassas have become a breeding ground for sectarian violence and ultraconservatism in religious thought, and are thus a major hindrance in the way of progressive social change. For the neo-fundamentalist
revivalists, the restricted and narrowly defined view of Islam formed and transmitted by the madrassas has proven as major an impediment to the establishment of complete din (Aqamat-e-din) as has been the modern secular education which is based on the notion of the separation of religion and public affairs. It is because of these sharply divergent views on the social role, religious significance and political consequences of the madrassa education that reform efforts have so far not been very successful. The suggestion to integrate the madrassa system with the modern system of education is easier said than done. One must not overlook or underestimate the real differences of attitudes, philosophy and goals between the traditional Islamic education as represented by the madrassas on the one hand, and the modern Western education system, on the other. At philosophical level, the Islamic education is clearly based on the epistemological notion that revelation (wahi) is the absolute and ultimate source of all knowledge; hence its exclusive emphasis is on scriptural authority (naql) and not on autonomous intellectual curiosity (aql). Disciplines based on scientific inquiry, empirical research or independent reasoning can be added to a religious curriculum as separate and isolated subjects but cannot be integrated into it without dismantling the whole enterprise.

Given the enormous opposition from the ulama to allow any radical changes in the system of madrassa education, the educational policy makers in Pakistan have tended to seek solution to the problem from their end: they have added some subjects from the traditional Islamic syllabus to modern syllabus of schools and colleges. But again these two types of subjects as taught in public schools and colleges remain totally separate and have no bearing on each other. This approach has also resulted in placing too great a burden on the already crowded schedule of subjects taught in schools. In most cases, Islamic and secular subjects, representing two parallel and contradictory
traditions of knowledge, co-exist in a state of irresolvable tension and tend to engender split personalities.

The other solution, advocated by Fazlur Rahman and Maududi, is to seek adaptation, i.e. elements from the two traditions are reconstructed in accordance with the teachings and the worldview of Islam and are then combined in a way that they complement each other. The establishment of the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan, and another university with the same name in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was considered steps toward that direction. These two universities are based on the Islamic theory of the unity of knowledge and indivisibility of thought and praxis. Their curricula, courses of studies and methodology seek to combine the traditional Islamic sciences with modern knowledge. Thus these universities have become implementing arms of the intellectual movement for the “Islamization of knowledge” under the auspices of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in the United States. The work plan adopted by the IIIT for the Islamization of knowledge sought to provide a framework for introducing reforms in the madrassa education. The objectives of the work plan include: (1) knowledge of the modern disciplines (2) knowledge of the Islamic legacy; (3) establishing specific relevance of Islam to each area of modern knowledge; (4) seeking ways for creative synthesis between the Islamic legacy and modern knowledge; and (5) disseminating the Islamized knowledge for the enrichment of the whole mankind. (Al-Faruqi, 1982:38-46). The problem, however, is that majority of the madrassa ulama have no knowledge of modern disciplines and are thus incapable of establishing a creative synthesis between traditional Islamic scholarship and modern social sciences and humanities. Their knowledge of modern disciplines is based mainly on secondary sources which, in most cases, are polemical Arabic and Urdu texts. Even the International Islamic University of Islamabad, which
was intended to combine the traditional and modern disciplines in a unified curriculum, remains a glorified madrassa thanks to the overwhelming intellectual influence of the faculty drawn from Al-Azhar graduates. With the exception of Law and Economics, most courses taught at the university, especially in the Islamic humanities, are not much different from the ones taught in traditional madrassas.

Recently several of the prominent madrasas in various parts of the country were also mired in political controversies, sectarian violence and cross-border regional conflicts. The role of the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith madrasas in the anti-Ahmadiya movement of 1974 and in the anti-Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Pakistan National Alliance movement of Nizam-e-Mustafa of 1977 has already been well-documented (Ahmad: 1990). It is a well known fact that the Deobandi affiliated madrasas in Punjab, NWFP, Sind and Baluchistan have become a major source of recruitment for the student organization, Jamiat Tulaba-i-Islam and the main Deobandi religio-political party, Jamiat Ulama-i-Islam. Similarly, Brelvi madrasas have been supplying political workers to Maulana Shah Ahmad Noorani’s Jamiat Ulama-i-Pakistan, and to its student’s wing, Anjuman Tulaba-i-Islam. Although major Shia madrasas, such as Jamia Al-Muntazir in Lahore, have resisted the temptation of mobilizing their students for political activism of Tehrik-i-Jaafriya, many small town Shia madrasas have shown no such constraints. Majority of the workers and supporters of Imamiya Students Organization, a Shia youth group, and Sipa-i-Muhammad a Shia activist group, are drawn from small and district town-based Shia madrasas. Ahl-e-Hadith Youth Force, a student outfit of Jamiat Ulama-i-Ahl-e-Hadith, is also an extension of their madrassa students from Lahore, Gujranwala and Faisalabad. It is obvious, therefore, that much of the political activism of the four major religio-political parties in Pakistan—Jamiat ulama-i-Islam, Jamiat Ulama-i-Pakistan, Jamiat Ulama-i-
Ahl-e- Hadith, and Tehrik-i-Jaafriya--is integrally linked with, and draws strength from, the madrassas affiliated with their respective schools of legal-theological thought. Jamiyat Ulama-i-Islam’s electoral success in certain constituencies of Baluchistan and NWFP, for example, has been directly related to the large number of Deobandi madrasas in these areas.

Several madrasas in Sind and Punjab have also become, since 1980s, centers of sectarian activism and violence. Jamia Islamiya in Binnori Town (New Town), Karachi and several other Deobandi madrassas in Lahore, Multan, Jhang, Gujranwala and Chakwal have become breeding grounds for Sipah-i-Sahaba, an aggressively anti-Shia Deobandi Sunni group which has been involved in a series of violent incidents against Tehrik-i-Jaafriya leaders and activists. Its underground off-shoot, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, which has claimed responsibility for killing dozens of Shia leaders and activists, is also a product of Deobandi madrasas, especially in central Punjab. The sectarian-oriented curriculum taught in most of the madrasas in Pakistan has further strengthened a tendency in their graduates toward religious intolerance. Some Deobandi madrasas in Karachi and central Punjab are believed to have become armed training camps for the activists of Sipah-i-Sahaba.

It was reported that the former Chief Minister of Punjab Mr. Shahbaz Sharif was contemplating police action against some of the Deobandi madrasas that were believed to be involved in providing training in terrorist activities to the activists of Sipah-i-Sahaba (Nawa-i-Waqt: 12 September 1999).

The role of the madrasas in transnational political developments and armed conflicts has been a subject of intense debate in Pakistan since the 1980s (Malik: 1997, pp. 217-19). Much of the armed resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was initially organized in the NWFP and Baluchistan-based Pakistani madrasas. Both the Afghan and Pakistani madrassa students were
in the forefront of the Jihadi movement against the communist regime in Kabul. Darul Uloom Haqqaniya of Akora Khatak near Peshawar and several other Deobandi madrassas in the NWFP played an important role in the mobilization and recruitment of thousands of volunteers for Afghan Jihad. Jamaat-i-Islami also used foreign funds for Afghan Jihad to establish a network of madrasas in the Afghan refugee camps in Baluchistan and NWFP. The Jamaat madrasas subsequently became recruitment and training centers for the foot soldiers of Gulbedin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-i-Islami movement. The emergence of the Taliban movement in 1994 -- known in some circles as General Naseerullah Barbra’s militia at that time -- is, in fact, a logical extension of the role Pakistani madrassas were playing in the Afghan Jihad during the 1980s. As I have argued elsewhere, the jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s provided an excellent alibi to the madrassas and their associated religio-political groups to receive vast amount of funds from Middle Eastern Muslim countries in the name of Afghan relief and jihad projects and then use these funds, or part of them, for recruiting more students, expanding physical facilities of their madrassas, and also for their sectarian activities, including acquisition of weapons (Ahmad: 1998). Today, while the Jamiyat Ulama-i-Islam of Maulana Fazlur Rahman and Maulana Sami-ul-Haq and their madrasas in the NWFP have become main sponsors of the Taliban, the Tehrik-i-Jaafriya has been active in mustering political support for the Iranian-backed Shia group, Hizb-i-Wahdat-i-Islami of Afghanistan.

Hence, given their vast and sustained experience in the Afghan Jihad, it was not difficult for many of these madrasas to switch to the Kashmir Jihad against India in the 1990s. Veterans of the Afghan jihad soon started mobilizing madrassa students for action in the Indian occupied Kashmir. Ahl-e- Hadith madrasas in Punjab and Deobandi and Jamaat-i-Islami madrasas in NWFP and Azad Kashmir have become centers of recruitment and training for Kashmir-bound mujahideen, especially
under the auspices of Lashkar-i-Taiba, Harkat-ul-Ansar, Al-Badr and Al-Jihad.

In view of the above developments, when many prominent madrassas are either engaged in domestic sectarian conflicts or in external jihads, the question of initiating fundamental changes in the curriculum and teaching methods of madrasas seems to have become irrelevant both for the ulama and the policy makers. In an interview with the author during the peak of the Kargil crisis in July 1999, a prominent madrasa alim in Lahore lamented: “Today my students know more about Kalashnikov than they do about sarf (accidence) and Nahw (syntax).”
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