

MADRASA EDUCATION IN INDIA: AN INTRODUCTION

ZUBAIR MEENAI

Professor in the Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Madrasas across the world and especially in south Asia have come under the scanner recently. There are several assumptions and misconceptions about the structure and functioning of the Madrasa system in India, leading to considerable social strife and unfair targeting of the Madrasa system. As Park, J., & Niyozov, S. (2008) put it, “since 11 September 2001 there has been a global upsurge in studies in madaris (plural of madrasa) across the Muslim world. This literature has contributed more to confusion than clarity about the number of madaris, their rationale, purpose, pedagogy, curricula, funding, administration, relations with the state, and global violence, particularly in madaris in South Asia and Southeast Asia.” This short article seeks to demystify the Madrasa system of education for the uninitiated so that there is a better understanding and appreciation of the system and its objectives.

The history of the Madrasa system started from the *Masjid al Nabvi* (The Prophet’s Mosque) in Medina, wherein there was a platform called *Ashab al Suffa*, where scholars and people of learning used to assemble. Islam came to the Indian sub-continent in the first century of the Islamic calendar and the first Madrasas came to be established around late 12th century.

After the collapse of the Mughal sultanate in India, the English in view of their political necessities started abolishing the old Islamic institutions that taught Islamic arts and sciences and wielded considerable influence over the community. The revolt of 1857 was an important turning point in history of *Madrasa* education in India. Not only the *Madrasas* lost state patronage but they also grew suspicious of the modern education. *Dini* (religious) and *Duniyavi* (wordly) knowledge were seen as opposed to each other. After the 1857 movement in which the Ulama took part in large numbers, in order to escape persecution at the hands of the British as also to preserve the Islamic arts and sciences, and for retaining the Islamic identity of Indian Muslims, the *Ulama*, migrated from Delhi and established the Darul Uloom, Deoband, (1865) a seminary, around 160 Kms from Delhi. *Dar-ul-Uloom* today the largest traditional *Madrasa* in the world represented a changed approach to Madrasa education. Until the early 16th Century, the focus of *Madrasas* was essentially on *Fiqh*, *Aqli’ulum* and *Tafsir*. Along with the *Aqli’ulum*, rational sciences like Arabic language, grammar, logic, philosophy etc were also part of the syllabus. The *Madrasas* essentially served the purpose of preparing Ulama and people who could join the states’ bureaucracies.

At almost the same time, Syed Ahmed Khan, started another educational movement, known as the Aligarh movement, that favoured modern English education. The founders of the Deoband movement stressed only on saving the religion and religious capital of Indian Muslims. Dissatisfied with both the Deoband and the Aligarh movement, few scholars like Allama Shibli Nomani and others established the Nadwatul Uloom, near Lucknow, attempting to provide both the religious orientation of Deoband and the worldly wisdom and knowledge, exemplified by Aligarh. Nadwa can truly be called the harbinger of reforms in the Madrasa educational

system in India. However, Nadwa could never become a movement and its spread is very limited. Darul Uloom Deoband, on the other hand spread far and wide and is today regarded as one of the most respected Madrasas across the world, coming a close second to the Al Azhar, Cairo. The Deobandis opposed partition, rejected the two-nation theory, and strongly supported the nationalist movement led by the Congress.

The Tradition of Islamic Education: The study and spread of religious knowledge (*ilm*) have always been at the heart of Islamic tradition. Islam has been described as a religion of the Book and of religious commentary and most Muslims regard religious study as a form of worship in its own right. Let us understand the structure of Islamic education in India. A child, male or female, at age 5-6 years, is initiated into Urdu language and is familiarized with the Holy Quran (through *Nazra*, i.e., reading the Holy Quran, once, without meaning and interpretation) in his home or through informal teaching by a *Maulvi* at the child's home or through a *Maktab*, i.e., a small informal school run in a local mosque by the *Maulvi* or *Imam* of that Mosque. This is a purely informal and voluntary set up, purely at the initiative of the parents and the community. Often the child is engaged in this stream concurrently with formal school education. However, for some children this is the only stream of option, consciously or because they may not have access to formal education. As far as the access issue among Muslims is concerned, it has been observed that apart from the physical access, which may be limited (there may not be any school nearby), there are also issues of social access. Muslims in small and mofussil towns have, because of their minority psyche, have taken upon themselves to preserve the Islamic knowledge and cultural heritage. This is achieved easily by first setting up their own Madrasas and sending their children to these Madrasas, where students are taught Islamic curriculum that is not *alien* or 'other', in a language and idiom that is theirs. The Madrasas therefore are largely community-based and community-managed schools where the teaching is focused on the Qur'an, Islam, and moral education.

If we take up the case of education of girls, the usual concerns of safety and relevance of modern education to their lives come up. The traditional role envisaged for a girl is that of a good wife and mother. Modern education does not seem to be calibrated for this. In addition, Islamic education is seen as useful to develop an ideal wife and mother, who would in turn socialise her children in the Islamic framework.

This is not to say that all Muslims would like to educate their children in Madrasas. In fact, most do not prefer to do so. Yet, when there are no secular opportunities or when the quality of education provided in the schools is low, parents are left with no option. In addition, what has to be kept in mind that large majority of Muslims across India, belong to the lowest socio-economic class, almost at par with the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. They are seldom able to manage both ends. In addition, as has been mentioned at other places also, there does not seem to be any logical connection between securing modern education and employment. Employment avenues do not open up automatically on securing modern education. This coupled with the perceived grievance among Muslims of discrimination by the state in terms of employment often push the parents to send their children to the Madrasas. Madrasas provide an ideal option as they provide free education, free board, free lodge, free textbooks, and

clothing, and after undergoing Madrasa education, the person becomes a respected *Aalim* or *Maulvi Sahab*, something that elevates the social status of the family.

Madrasas operate from Shawwal {10th month of Islamic Hijra Calendar} to Ramazan {9th month of Hijra}. Thus, are open for 10 months. They observe very less holidays; only on Friday in a week, on 26th January, 15 August and on Id ul Fitra and Id ul Azha {Baqraid, Muslim Festival in which they perform animal sacrifice}. They observe a long vacation from late Shaban {8th Hijra month} to half of Shawwal; nearly 40-45 days. It is not so that during the vacation days madrasas are closed at all, many madrasas have a good number of students who do not go home and students who come before time to seek enrolment in the respective madrasa. Therefore, it will not be out of place to say that madrasas serve as orphanages also where poor and orphans get education besides everything they need. Between this duration the teachers, some students, in many madrasas, and donation collectors set out to collect donations for next year.' See also (Qasmi, M,K . 2005).

Structure of the Madrasa System: A Madrasa 'means a building and boarding rooms where Muslim students having passed Maktab course are taught Aalimiat course. This course is generally of 8 years while some Madrasas have shortened one year. Every Madrasa does not have the 8-year course, but commonly, Madrasas have 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7-year course then they sent the students to complete graduation to big madrasas like Darul Uloom Deoband, Mazahir Uloom Saharanpur, Darul Uloom Nadvah Lucknow, Jamia Salafia Banaras, Alfalah Bilariaganj, Ashrafia Mubarakpur and others. Because the final year of this course that is called "Daura-e-Hadith" is taught in very few madrasas of the country' (Qasmi, M,K . 2005).

At age 8-10 years, the child is admitted to the *Madrasa* for either of the two streams: either *Hifz* or *Arabi*. In *Hifz*, the main objective of the student is to memorise the Holy Quran. This may take close to three years. After *Hafiza* (i.e., memorizing the Holy Quran), the student may opt to become a *Qari*, i.e., one who understands the nuances and intonation of the Arabic Language as in the Holy Quran and can perform *Qiraat*, i.e, the specialised ways of reciting the Holy Quran. A *Qari* may opt for higher education and take admission in the *Arabi* stream.

In the *Arabi* stream, the student is admitted to the first year of *Arabi*, known as *Arabi Oula* or sometimes *Maulvi Oula*. (*Oula* means first). In the *Arabi* stream, the students continue for four years. For the first two years, the student studies elementary Arabic language and grammar. These *Madrasa* also teach the students Holy Quran and its translation. In the third year of *Arabi*, the Deobandi Madrasas teach *Fiqh* and the *Ahl-e-Hadis* teach *Hadis*. In the fourth year of *Arabi*, the Deobandi *Madrasas* continue with *Fiqh* and the *Ahl-e-Hadis* introduce the *Mishqaat*, the collection of *Ahaadis*'. At the end of the fourth year, when the student is around 14 years of age, the *Ahl-e-Hadis* offers the student a rather inconsequential degree of *Maulviyat* of the Lucknow / Allahabad Board of Uttar Pradesh. At the end of fifth year, in the Madrasas run by the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, the students may appear for the examination for the degree of *Alimiyat*. Under the *Madrasas* of the Deobandi School, the student appears for the *Mishqaat* also popularly known as *Alimiyat*.

This stage is the most crucial in the *Madrassa* education. Most of the students drop out of the *Madrassa* system at this stage as the curriculum becomes very tough to handle suddenly. Students after completing the fifth year of *Arabi* education, then normally try to secure admission in *Darul Uloom*, Deoband or some other institution of higher learning for last two years of their education to secure the degree of *Fazilat*. Students who pass the *Fazilat* course may opt for another one-2 years of education to become a *Mufti*.

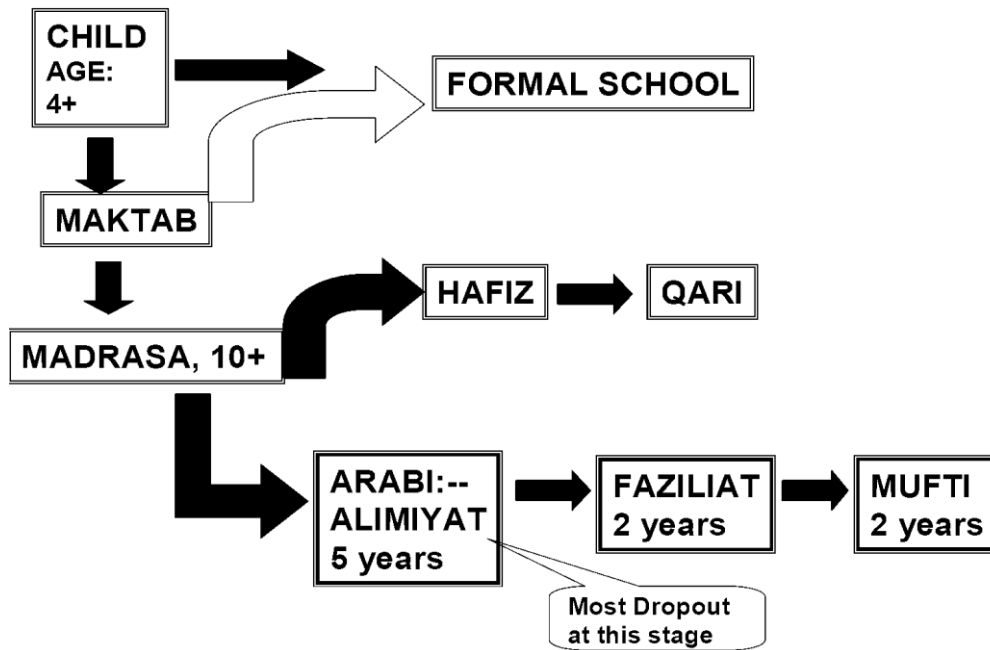


Fig: 01: STRUCTURE OF MADRASA EDUCATION

The Curriculum: Various attempts to modify the syllabus employed at the Indian *Madrasas* were made from time to time and the most important contribution in this regard was of Mulla Nizamuddin who prepared a reformed *Madrassa* syllabus in the mid 18th century. The Syllabus named after him as '*Dars-e-Nizami* included new books on *Hadith* and *Tafsir* and also focused on rational sciences.

One of the characteristics of the *Dars e Nizami* is that more attention has been paid to develop insight, and comprehension among students. This sets the base for the student and he is then able to comprehend issues and develop his own insight and understanding. The standard of *Tafsir* and *Hadith* is limited and there is less emphasis on literature.

Given the growth of *Madrasas* in India, there is wide heterogeneity in their curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, or emphases. In addition, there is no uniformity in terms of the years one has to put in to acquire any degree. However, some of the standard subjects and the recommended books are listed as under:

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Recommended Books</i>
Biography of the Prophet (PBUH)	<i>Seerat e Khatimul Ambiya: Mufti Mohd Shafi</i>
Conjugation/ Grammar Arabic	Arabic Primer
Syntax Arabic	<i>Nahv e Mir</i>
Arabic Literature	<i>Miftahul Arabia & Al Qiratul Waziya, Deewan e Mutanabbi, Deewan e Himasa</i>
Calligraphy	Exercise Based
Cantillation	Exercise Based
Fiqh	<i>Noorul Izah & Qudoori, Tasheelul Usool Arabi, Usoolus Shasi</i>
Quranic Exegesis	<i>Tarjumanul Quran</i>
Hadith	<i>Mishkatul Athar, Alfiyatul Hadith, Mishkat, Sharah Nukhbah, Bukhari Shareef, Muslim Shareef,</i>
History	<i>Tareekh e Millat / Khilafat e Rashida, Bani Umayya, Abbasiya, Turkiya</i>
Rhetoric	<i>Darusul Balagha, Mukhtasarul Ma'ani, Talkhisul Miftah,</i>
Beliefs (Aqaaid)	<i>Aqidatul Tahavi, Shara Aqaid,</i>
Logic	<i>Sullamul Uloom</i>
Tafsir	<i>Tafsir Jalalayn, Afauzul Kabeer, Husamy, Ibne Khatir, Baizavi, Manahilul Irfan</i>

Equivalence: It is difficult as also undesirable to equate the Madrasa system of education with modern education, in terms of standards, class, and age. However, the pattern followed in UP would give us some idea of the equivalence:

Standard	Class Level	Equivalent to
<i>Tahtania</i>	Class V	Primary Education
<i>Foqania</i>	VI-VIII	Middle / Upper Primary
<i>Munshi/ Maulvi</i>	IX-X	Secondary School
<i>Aalim</i>	XI-XII	Sr Secondary
<i>Kamil</i>	BA	Graduate
<i>Fazil</i>	MA	Post Graduate

Finances: Most of the Madrasas operate on individual / community charity. Some also depend on overseas charities. Individuals from the community usually contribute a certain amount on a regular basis. Often the community contributes grains for the food of the students. Sometimes a portion of the produce is pledged to the Madrasas. Some Madrasas try to establish their own sources of income in the form of agriculture or letting out shops in their premises. However, most Madrasas survive on a very meager income, that too also uncertain. As far as overseas charity is concerned, there is little information available.

Often the Madrasas appoint collection agents known as *Safir's* (literally Ambassadors) who go out to other cities and sometimes even outside the country to collect charity for the Madrasa and retain a certain percentage of the collections. These *Safir's* normally engage in this collection during the month of Ramadan, wherein all Muslims have to apportion a certain proportion of their yearly earnings for charity. In addition, during the Eid-ul-Azha, most Muslims donate the skin of the sacrificed animal (often goat/sheep) to the Madrasa. Students go round collecting the skins, house to house. One of the other methods, widely prevalent in most Madrasas is the collection of *Khuraaq*, i.e., diet (meals, twice daily) of one or two students from each appointed household, that may have volunteered to sponsor the *khuraaq* for a certain number of students daily for a year. Students go to the appointed houses, twice a day to collect their *Khuraaq*.

Teachers / Muddaris: Great emphasis is placed on the role of the teacher in traditional Muslim education. As authority figures worthy of respect, the teacher is recognised as the transmitter of religious knowledge. It is interesting to note that one will not come across any institution to train teachers who would then go and teach in *Madrasas*. Most teachers in *Madrasas* possess the requisite qualifications acquired at the *Madrasa*. There is no system of imparting training like the B.Ed or Basic Training. As a result, most of the teaching in *Madrasas* is done in a manner in which the teacher himself might have studied. Most teachers are low paid, their salary ranging from Rs 1500 to Rs 2500 per month, often with meals thrown in. Taken together, the Madrasas appear to be institutions that are substandard, underfunded, under-resourced, and staffed by teachers of generally low quality.

Management and Functioning: In the Madrasa system prevalent in India today, all Madrasas are almost completely autonomous in their affairs. There is no overall coordinating body or a federation of Madrasas, each Madrasa is free to set its own syllabus and adopt its own teaching methods. While this undoubtedly gives the Madrasas a certain degree of flexibility, it also means that attempts to reform the system as a whole face considerable difficulty, as we would have to approach each Madrasa individually.

Madrasa Boards: A large number of state governments have established Madrasa Board to support and provide equivalence and quality in the Madrasa education system. Madrasa boards regulate Madrasas, establishing curricula that blend religious and secular education to ensure quality and alignment with modern standards. Their roles include conducting examinations, providing scholarships, promoting vocational training, and offering financial assistance for infrastructure development and teacher training. By integrating secular subjects like science and mathematics and focusing on inclusivity, these boards aim to equip Muslim students for

holistic educational empowerment and active participation in society. However, not all Madrasas seek accreditation to the State Boards and are thus left out of the ambit of these interventions.

The UP Board of Madrasa Education Act, 2004 is a significant legislative framework aimed at regulating and promoting the education system of madrasas in the state of Uttar Pradesh. This Act seeks to provide a structured approach to madrasa education, ensuring that these institutions adhere to certain educational standards while also preserving their unique cultural and religious identity. The Act plays a crucial role in integrating madrasa education with the broader educational landscape of the state, thereby enhancing the quality of education for students enrolled in these institutions. The framework promotes the integration of madrasas into the state's broader educational system, making education more inclusive for minority students and providing them with a structured path to recognized qualifications. The state has also established some level of equivalence with modern education system. For example,

- Tahtania (Primary Education): This foundational stage is equivalent to mainstream school classes 1 through 5. It focuses on basic literacy and fundamental education.
- Fauquania (Upper Primary Education): Corresponds to classes 6 through 8 in the mainstream system. It builds on the Tahtania level with intermediate academic subjects.
- Munshi (for Urdu/Persian) or Maulvi (for Arabic) (Secondary): This level is equivalent to a Class 10 certificate. Students in this stage gain knowledge that parallels the standard secondary school curriculum.
- Alim (Senior Secondary): Equivalent to a Class 12 certificate, this is the highest school-level certification offered in madrasas. It represents an advanced level of education.

One of the most successful Madrasa Boards is that of the state of Kerala. Madrasa boards in Kerala, particularly Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama (SKIMVB), provide a structured Islamic education system, conducting examinations for levels like Hifz, Lower, Higher, and Secondary, and inspecting madrasas to ensure standards and facilities. Boards, such as the prominent Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidyabyasa Board (SKIMVB), create the syllabus and publish textbooks for madrasa classes. The curriculum is based on Islamic sciences and includes subjects like the Quran, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh). Their role also includes promoting modernization by incorporating formal and vocational subjects, improving curriculum, training teachers, and expanding access to education for poor and orphaned children within the community. These boards serve as vital institutions that balance traditional Islamic teachings with contemporary educational needs, supporting the holistic development of students and community welfare.

Negative Imagery: It is fairly recently that negative imagery is being used to describe the Madrasas. Madarsas are often seen as giving education that creates barriers to modern knowledge, stifling creativity and breeding bigotry and also fostering fundamentalism. However, Madrasas in India have largely been insulated from these undesirable influences. Candland (2005) posits that ‘militant sectarianism (in these countries) did not arise organically within the madaris and it was not the product of an Islamic approach to education but was a

by-product of a stagnant but complex economic, social, and geopolitical environment'. Most Madrasas in India are affiliated to larger Madrasas like the Darul Uloom, Deoband, etc and follow a moderate version of Islam, that speaks of mutual co-existence.

Madrasa Reforms: Reform-minded Muslims across Asia have increasingly begun seeking new ways to reduce educational dualism by integrating more general (secular) educational materials into their school curricula. Such innovation reflects the growing influence of pluralism and reform in madaris. As Islamic schools adapt to the changing times, many have managed to fill evolving educational niches. As a result of globalisation processes, Madrasas are now becoming concerned not only with preparing children for adult roles within their respective Islamic communities, but education increasingly has to respond to national and local economic and moral requirements (Daun & Walford, 2004). The Government of India through its various mechanisms has been intervening in the field of Madrasa education in India. One of the most important interventions has been the Modernisation Schemes.

Efforts to modernize madrasas focus on integrating modern subjects like science, math, and English into their traditional religious curricula through government schemes, aiming to improve student employability and bridge the gap with the national education system. While intended to foster inclusivity, these initiatives have faced challenges including resistance from conservative groups, lack of proper implementation, and the debates about cultural erasure and the effectiveness of these programs.

Future Options: As far as the future of the graduates of these Madrasas is concerned, there are not many options available. Some universities in India like the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University provide an option of entry into the formal education system to the Madrasa graduates in specific disciplines, especially languages, etc. Some of them opt to specialize in Arabic language and go on to become interpreters in the Middle East, some opt for post-graduation in other disciplines and make a career in the modern world. However, for a large majority, after *Hifz*, etc, there are no options, except leading the prayers in the mosques or teaching in a Madrasa.

As the above introduction reveals, the Madrasa system in India seems to be steeped in time, oblivious of the changes around them. It is often felt that the management of the Madrasas have purposely insulated themselves and the system, out of their fear of 'corruption from the modern system' seeping in their system. Often, this appears quite logical from their point of view as they view the existence and continuation of their system as solely in the service of the faith, rather than development of the individual. For them, the purpose is not to produce engineers and doctors but to train scholars "to interpret Islam in relation to the demands of the specific time" and "preserve an authentic Islamic heritage" (Hefner & Zaman, 2007, p. 100) by inculcating piety and promoting religious knowledge. On the other hand, the demands of the modern times and the aspirations of the young students in Madrasas cannot be overlooked. A well-considered balance needs to be worked out to ensure that the twin objectives of service to the faith and individual aspirations are taken care of.

References

1. Arshad M, (2005): Tradition of Madrasa Education in Wasey S: Madrasas in India: Trying to be Relevant, Global Media, 8188869104
2. Qasmi M K (2005): Madrasa Education: Its Strength and Weaknesses, Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd. Delhi & Markazul Maarif Mumbai, 81-7827113-1
3. Park, J., & Niyozov, S. (2008): Madrasa education in South Asia and Southeast Asia: current issues and debates. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 28(4), 323–351.
4. Candland, C. (2005): “Pakistan’s recent experience in reforming Islamic education”. In *Education reform in Pakistan: Building for the future*, Edited by: Hathaway, R.M. 151 – 165. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
5. Hefner, R.W. and Zaman, M.Q. , eds. (2007): *Schooling Islam: The culture and politics of modern Muslim education*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
6. Daun , H. and Walford , G. , eds. (2004): *Educational strategies among Muslims in the context of globalization: Some national case studies* , Leiden, Holland : Brill .quoted in Park, J., & Niyozov, S. (2008): Madrasa education in South Asia and Southeast Asia: current issues and debates. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 28(4), 323–351.