Voices for Reform in the Indian Madrasas

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Reforming the *madrasas* has today emerged as a major concern for many. Advocates of reform in the *madrasas* have widely different understandings of the rationale of such reform and the forms that it should assume, each reflecting their own particular agendas. This paper seeks to examine the different ways in which reform of the *madrasas* in contemporary India is imagined and advocated by different sections of the '*ulama* and Muslim social activists.

Critics of the *madrasas* tend to see them in stereotypical terms, often branding all *madrasas* as backward and reactionary. They are routinely described by their detractors, Muslims as well as others, as conservative and illiberal. They are seen as a major burden on Muslim society, consuming much of its meager resources, and a stumbling block in the progress of the community. Much of what they teach is said to be 'useless' in the contemporary context, this complaint reflecting a view that 'useful' knowledge is that which helps equip a student to participate in the modern economy. Such critiques, while not entirely bereft of truth, appear somewhat far-fetched and exaggerated. To claim that all *madrasas* are static and impervious to change is grossly misleading. *Madrasas* today are considerably different from their counterparts in pre-colonial and colonial India, although there are significant continuities as well. As for the argument that *madrasas* are conservative, this is to state the obvious, for, as the *madrasas* generally see themselves, they are indeed the guardians of Islamic 'orthodoxy', regarding their principal role as the conservation of the Islamic 'orthodox' tradition, which, although diversely understood, historically constructed and in a constant process of elaboration, is generally seen by the '*ulama* as unchanging and fixed. Not surprisingly, therefore, many '*ulama* regard the existing *madrasa* system as in no need of any major reform. They argue that since in the past the *madrasas* produced great Islamic scholars there is no need for any change to be made in them today. If the *madrasas* are not producing pious, God-fearing and socially engaged '*ulama* today, the fault lies, so it is asserted, in the lowering standards of piety and dedication, increasing materialism and the consequent straying from the path set by the pious elders, and not in the *madrasa* system as such, which are considered as largely adequate and in no need of any major reform.

'*Traditionalist*' '*Ulama and the Challenge of Reform*

The debates over *madrasa* reform reflect different understandings of appropriate Islamic education and indeed of Islam itself. As many 'traditionalist' '*ulama* see it, since the 'elders' (*buzurgan*) have evolved a perfect system of education, and

since Islam itself is the ultimate truth, that there is no need to learn from others. To seek to do so is sometimes regarded as a sign of weak faith and straying from the path that the 'elders' of the past have trod. Change in the *madrasa* system is, therefore, often considered, as threatening the identity and intensity of the faith. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, it is recognized as threatening to undermine the power of the 'ulama as leaders of the community and their claims to speak authoritatively for Islam. 'Traditional' 'ulama often see proposals for *madrasa* reform as threatening to interfere, if not invade, what they regard as their own territory. Since their claims to authority as spokesmen of Islam are based on their mastery of certain disciplines and texts, quite naturally any change in the syllabus, such as the introduction of new subjects or new books or the exclusion of existing ones, directly undermines their own claims. Besides, they fear that the introduction of 'modern' disciplines in the *madrasa* curriculum might lead to a creeping secularization of the institution as such, besides tempting their students away from the path of religion and enticing them towards the snares of the world. Proposals for reform of the *madrasas* by incorporating 'modern' subjects are sometimes seen as hidden ploys or even as grand conspiracies to dilute the religious character of the *madrasas*. Religion is here understood as a distinct sphere, neatly set apart from other spheres of life. This is readily apparent in the writings of many 'ulama. Take, for instance, the following statement of Ashraf 'Ali Thanwi, a leading early twentieth century Deobandi 'alim:

> It is, in fact, a source of great pride for the religious *madrasas* not to impart any secular (*duniyavi*) education at all. For if this is done, the religious character of these *madrasas* would inevitably be grievously harmed. Some people say that *madrasas* should teach their students additional subjects that would help them earn a livelihood, but this is not the aim of the *madrasa* at all. The *madrasa* is actually meant for those who have gone mad with their concern for the hereafter (*jinko fikr-i akhirat ne divana kar diya hai*).[5]

Other 'traditionalists' may not go to such lengths in denying the need for inclusion of 'modern' subjects in the curriculum, but might, while accepting the need for reform, argue that this should be strictly limited, and must not threaten or dilute the 'religious' character of the *madrasas*. *Madrasas*, they argue, are geared to the training of religious specialists, and so it is important that 'worldly' subjects must not take the upper hand over religious instruction. Rather, it is enough, they stress, if the students are able to read and speak elementary English, perform basic mathematical problems and are familiar with basic social sciences, albeit suitably 'Islamised', and to that extent they welcome efforts for reform. It is enough, they stress, that the *madrasa* students gain a general familiarity with these subjects so that they can function in the modern world. It is

also argued that if too much stress were given to 'modern' subjects in the *madrasas* the work load for the students would be simply too much to bear, because of which they would turn out to be 'of little use either for the faith or for the world' (*na din ke kam ka na duniya ka*).

While these arguments may not be without merit, the opposition of some sections of the '*ulama* to proposals for reform in the *madrasas* must be also seen as reflecting the fierce challenges that they perceive from Muslims articulating a different vision of Islam and Islamic knowledge. If all knowledge, if conducted within the limits set by the Qur'an and the Hadith, the traditions of the Prophet, is Islamic, as many reformists insist, the monopoly over the authoritative interpretation of Islam enjoyed by the 'traditionalist' '*ulama* is considerably undermined, if not done away altogether. If, as some reformers see it, a pious Muslim scientist, researching the human cell or the stars in order to discover the laws of God, is as much an '*alim* as one who has devoted his life to the study of the Hadith, the superior position that the 'traditionalist' '*ulama* claim for themselves based on their expert knowledge of certain classical texts is effectively overturned.

Yet, *madrasas* are far from being completely immune to change and reform altogether. Likewise, few '*ulama* could claim to be completely satisfied with the *madrasas* as they are today. Indeed, leading '*ulama* are themselves conscious of the need for change in the *madrasa* system. As their graduates go out and take up a range of new careers, in India and abroad, and as pressures from within the community as well as from the state and the media for reform grow, *madrasas*, too, are changing. Change is, however, gradual, emerging out of sharply contested notions of appropriate Islamic education.

The dilemmas that accompany change are well illustrated in the case of the Dar ul-'Ulum at Deoband, often considered to be a major bastion of conservatism. The Deobandis stress conformity to traditional understandings of Hanafi *fiqh* or jurisprudence, and they tend to see the solution to all contemporary problems as lying in a rigid adherence to past *fiqh* formulations. New ways of interpreting Islam are often seen as akin to heresy and 'wrongful innovation'. As one critic of Deoband, himself a product of the *madrasa*, says, the traditional '*ulama* 'don't want to change. They are scared of the light because they have got used to darkness'.[6] Yet, today, there is mounting pressure from within the broader Deobandi fold for reform in the system of *madrasa* education.

Faced with increasingly vocal demands that Deoband reform its syllabus, in October 1994 the *madrasa* organized a convention attended by a large number of teachers of Deobandi *madrasas* from all over India. The convention was ostensibly held to discuss the question of reform of the syllabus of the *madrasas* at

length, but the inaugural lecture delivered by the rector the rector of the Deoband *madrasa*, Maulana Marghub ur-Rahman, suggested how far the organizers were really willing to go in allowing for change. The Maulana insisted that there was no need at all to introduce 'modern' education in the *madrasas*. They were thousands of schools in the country, he said, and Muslim children who wanted to study 'modern' subjects could enroll there instead. Introducing 'modern' subjects in the *madrasa* would, he argued, 'destroy their [religious] character'. He argued that Islam had 'clearly divided' knowledge into two distinct categories of 'religious' and 'worldly'. 'The paths and destinations of these two branches of knowledge', he claimed, 'were totally different', indeed mutually opposed. 'If one seeks to travel on both paths together', combining 'religious' and 'worldly' knowledge, he asserted, he would 'get stuck in the middle'. Hence, he stressed, *madrasas* must remain 'purely religious', as the Deobandi elders had themselves insisted.[7]

Predictably, the convention concluded with a unanimous decision not to make any concessions at all to those who were clamouring for reform of the *madrasa* curriculum. The convention passed a resolution declaring that because Islam was a 'complete and perfect way of life' (*mukammil din*), it provided 'solutions to all problems'. Hence, to meet the challenges of modern life Muslims needed to rely 'only on the Qur'an, Hadith and *fiqh'*, and there was no need for 'Western knowledge and culture'.[8] The only change in the *madrasa* syllabus that the convention agreed upon was cosmetic, to increase a couple of books for some subjects and to reduce the number of texts for others. As one critic, himself a graduate of the Deoband *madrasa*, caustically remarked:

It seems that that the convention had not been organized to seriously discuss the *madrasa* curriculum, to make suitable changes in it in accordance with changing social conditions, to meet modern demands and to improve the functioning of the *madrasas*. Rather, it appears to have been held simply to announce that all is well with the *madrasas*, and that because they worked well in the past they are doing so today, too, and to claim that those who are demanding reform have doubtful intentions. If this indeed was the intention of holding this convention, there was no need to do so. To prevent one's own weaknesses from being publicized and to proclaim the victories of the past is not a constructive approach.[9]

Despite the great reluctance of the managers of Deoband to allow for any significant reform in the *madrasa* system, the winds of change are being felt today even in the hallowed portals of the Dar ul-'Ulum. In fact, the organizing of the above-mentioned convention probably owed, among other factors, to the increasingly vocal demands on the part of some Deobandis that the *madrasa* needed to change with the times. Not every Deobandi is a diehard conservative,

and not all of them are opposed to change in the *madrasas*. Qari Muhammad Tayyeb, the rector of the Deoband *madrasa* before Maulana Marghub ur-Rahman took over, seemed to be somewhat more flexible and open to change than his successor. Addressing a government-sponsored conference on madrasa education, he argued that while no one could agree to change in the teaching of the Qur'an in the *madrasas*, as far as those subjects or books that were 'servants of the Qur'an' (*khadim-i Qur'an*) were concerned they could be modified according to changing conditions. Explaining what he meant, he argued that the ways of understanding the Qur'an could change over time. In the past, when Greek philosophy or Sufism were dominant, the Qur'an was understood through their lenses. In today's 'scientific age', however, the Qur'an needed to be studied from a scientific perspective, generating new means of expressing the eternal truths of the sacred text. Therefore, he went on, books or subjects (specifically philosophy and logic) used to comprehend the Qur'an must change with the times. In other words, he argued, there was scope for reform in the *madrasa* syllabus, but he insisted that it was for the '*ulama* alone to decide the direction and extent of reform.[10]

The growing pressure for change at the Dar ul-'Ulum owes, in part, to the influence of young Deobandi graduates, who, after completing their studies at the *madrasa*, have gone to regular universities for higher studies or have taken up a range of occupations in India and abroad, but continue to maintain a link with their alma mater. Aware of the rapidly changing world around them, from which *madrasa* students are sought to be insulated, they help transmit new ideas that, in turn, have given birth to new initiatives at Deoband itself. An important role in this regard is played by the Tanzim-i Abna ul-Qadim, the Old Boys' Association of the Deoband *madrasa*, with its headquarters in Delhi. It has the following ambitious list of aims and objectives:

1. To set up study centres and libraries to promote awareness about national and international affairs.
2. To promote the study of the Qur'an and Hadith, the movement of Shah Waliullah as well as of non-Islamic movements and to publish literature on these.
3. To publish articles in newspapers and journals on religious issues and on social reform.
4. To promote religious as well as modern education.
5. To establish *shari'ah* committees in Muslim localities consisting of '*ulama* and imams of mosques to solve disputes in accordance with the *shari'ah*.
6. To promote social reform in accordance with the *shari'ah*, such as discouraging wasteful expenses on celebrations, dowry, un-Islamic practices and unwarranted divorce.

7. To encourage Muslims to get involved in social work projects to help the poor.
8. To work along with people of other religions and castes for common social aims and for general relief and development of all, irrespective of religion and caste.
9. To promote interaction and good relations between people of different religions.
10. To remove misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims among non-Muslims.[11]

The Association publishes a monthly magazine in Urdu, the *Tarjuman-i Dar ul-'Ulum*, which is widely read by graduates, students and teachers of the Deoband madrasa as well as of various other *madrasas* affiliated to Deoband. The magazine serves as an important vehicle for the transmission of new ideas, including issues related to *madrasa* reform. In contrast to many '*ulama* at Deoband itself, it insists on the need for reform in the *madrasa* system if *madrasas* are to play a constructive role in society. It advocates a controlled 'modernization', seeing this, not as a departure from, but, rather, as a return to Islam and the vision of the founders of Deoband. Its appeals to go back to the 'authentic' Islamic tradition serve, in fact, to facilitate change and reform, rather than to oppose it. Thus, for instance, in an article published in the magazine, Maulana Zain ul-Sajid bin Qasmi, a Deobandi graduate and now a teacher of Islamic Studies at the Aligarh Muslim University, writes that *madrasas* can no longer ignore 'modern' challenges. 'We need '*ulama* who are familiar with both religious as well as modern knowledge to serve the community and reply to the attacks on Islam from the West in the West's own language', he stresses.[12] While this proposal obviously suggests a defensive posture vis-à-vis the challenge of the West, it also signals a recognition of the importance of 'modern' knowledge and might even represent an Islamic appropriation of 'modernity' itself. In a similar vein, another contributor to the journal, the Deobandi graduate Maulana 'Abdur Rahim 'Abid, writes that many younger '*ulama* today rightly feel that *madrasas* need to broaden their curriculum to include basic education in subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Social Sciences, Hindi and English. It is not necessary, he stresses, that students at *madrasas* be given detailed instruction in these 'modern' subjects, but they should be familiarized with them on at least an elementary level. He recognizes that this might be construed by some as a betrayal of the Deobandi tradition, but assures his readers that in actual fact it is not so. He informs them that the founder of the *madrasa*, Maulana Qasim Nanotawi, arranged for Sanskrit to be taught at Deoband in its initial years, and that another leading reformist '*alim*, Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanwi, had, likewise, suggested the need to include Hindi as well as basic modern law in the *madrasa* curriculum.[13] In other words, he writes, the

Deobandi elders felt that the *madrasa* syllabus should be dynamic in order to equip would-be '*ulama* with the changing conditions of the world around them so that they could provide answers to modern questions and challenges. Yet, he notes with distress that when a Muslim doctor based in America offered to send several computers to the Dar ul-'Ulum free of cost for the students, the authorities of the *madrasa* declined, saying that they would be of no use to them. He laments that by opposing 'modern' knowledge the *madrasa* authorities are actually working against the original vision of the founders of Deoband.[14] Such critiques of the conservatives inside Deoband are routine in the pages of the Association's magazine, and reflect an increasing dissatisfaction among several younger Deobandis with what they see as the inflexible, authoritarian conservatism of sections of the *madrasa* authorities.

Waris Mazhari is the editor of the *Tarjuman-i Dar-ul 'Ulum*. A graduate of the Deoband *madrasa*, he later studied at the Nadwat ul-'Ulama, Lucknow and then at the Jami'a Millia Islamiya, New Delhi. Besides editing the journal, he is involved in a number of projects promoting Islamic as well as 'modern' education among Muslims, including among *madrasa* graduates. Like many other contributors to the journal, he, too, is critical of some aspects of the Deoband *madrasa*, particularly its curriculum, on the grounds that, 'In many respects it is irrelevant, and is not able to meet the challenges of modern life'. He stresses the need for the introduction of new subjects as well as new books for teaching traditional disciplines. Several texts now being used in the *madrasas*, some of which are many centuries old, he says, need to be replaced by modern equivalents. He cites the instance of the *Shara-i Aqa'id*, a treatise on theology written some six hundred years ago, which continues to be taught in many Indian *madrasas*. It is written in an archaic style, he says, and is full of references to antiquated Greek philosophy that students today can hardly comprehend. Rather than providing students with a firm understanding of the basic principles of Islamic theology, it deals with imaginary and hypothetical problems and verbal puzzles. 'For example', he says, 'it asks questions such as: Is there one sky or seven or nine? Or, can the sky be broken into parts?'. He regards this as irrelevant and unscientific. He notes that this book, like many other similar texts, is no longer being taught in schools in the Arab world, and so argues that there is no need why it should be taught at Indian *madrasas* any longer, although he agrees that many conservative '*ulama* at Deoband vehemently disagree.

Mazhari advocates a thorough revision of the texts used at Deoband, particularly those used for such core subjects as theology and jurisprudence. The books of theology still used at Deoband, he says, are largely based on ancient Greek philosophy, having been written at a time when Greek philosophy posed a major challenge to Islam. They were also intended to combat various other rival schools and sects, such as the Kharijites and the Ismai'lis, and so they deal at great length

with their doctrines in order to refute them. Today, however, he stresses, the challenge from Greek philosophy and the rival sects no longer exists, and so the traditional books of theology do not have much relevance in our day. What *madrasas* need today, instead, he says, are books of theology that also take into account the confirmed findings of modern science and that seek to engage with contemporary ideological challenges, such as materialism, existentialism, atheism, Marxism, post-modernism and so on. For this he suggests the introduction of new commentaries on the Qur'an. The medieval Qur'anic commentators, whose books are still used in the *madrasas*, certainly did great service to the faith, he agrees. However, he adds, they were, after all, human beings, and no matter how pious they may have been they were certainly not infallible. When seeking to interpret the Qur'an they always insisted that theirs was a human effort, admitting that no human being could reveal fully or exactly the will of God as expressed in the Qur'an. Hence, to regard their commentaries as the last word on the Qur'an, as many 'conservative' *'ulama* seem to, is wrong. Many medieval commentaries, he says, also suffer from the influence of concocted *hadith* reports and from polemical debates and controversies. Further, the commentators were naturally also influenced in their thinking by their own social location, by the general prevailing social environment as well as by the then available stock of knowledge, and all this is reflected in the different commentaries that have been written down the ages. Hence, he stresses, today, when social conditions have undergone such a radical transformation and when human knowledge has so vastly expanded, new interpretations of and commentaries on the Qur'an are needed. 'Since Muslims believe that the Qur'an is of eternal validity and provides guidance for all times', he says, 'newer interpretations and commentaries of the text are needed as times change, in order to show the relevance of the Qur'an in every age'.

Likewise, in the teaching of *fiqh*, which occupies a central place in the present *madrasa* curriculum, Mazhari advocates radical reform. Opposed to the practice of blind *taqlid* of jurisprudential precedent, he argues that *fiqh* must always evolve with time, for as conditions change and new issues emerge new *fiqh* responses must be articulated. He calls for the need to exercise *ijtihad* to examine matters afresh and to take into account new developments. He agrees that in matters of faith (*aqa'id*) and worship (*'ibadat*) and other areas that are specifically legislated for in the Qur'an, there can be no *ijtihad*, for these are given for all time. However, in large areas in the domain of social transactions (*mu'amilat*) one must, he says, be open to the possibilities of new interpretations. He regrets that this is strongly discouraged in the Indian *madrasas*, suggesting that this could be because it would undermine the authority of the conservative *'ulama*, whose claims as guides of the community rest on their knowledge of the classical texts. He finds hope, however, in the younger generation of Islamic scholars who increasingly are willing to articulate dissent. 'While we respect our predecessors

and cherish their great contributions', he says, 'we must not go to the extent of putting them on a divine pedestal, for 'worship of the elders' (*buzurg parasti*) is strongly condemned in Islam.'

Mazhari's vision for the reform of the *madrasas* is not limited simply to their curriculum. He recommends that *madrasas* that have the necessary funds should make arrangements for vocational training for those students who do not want to go on to become professional '*ulama*. He suggests the need for community leaders to give more attention to girls' education, Islamic as well as 'modern'. In this regard he is critical of many '*ulama* who are not in favour of higher education for girls, arguing that their stance is not in accordance with the Qur'an. He cites the instance of an article that he wrote in his journal lauding the achievement of a Muslim girl who came second in the examinations for the Indian Police Service in 2001, presenting her as a model for other Muslim girls to follow. He received a number of angry letters from '*ulama* protesting the article, but, he adds, several graduates of Deoband wrote to him congratulating him for the piece. Mazhari is also critical of the conservative '*ulama* for being indifferent to the religiously plural context of India. He stresses that as community leaders the '*ulama* must play an active role in promoting inter-communal harmony and dialogue, but regrets that this is given almost no attention in the present *madrasa* system.[15]

The influence of the new thinking as represented by individual '*ulama* such as those associated with the Old Boys' Association, on the one hand, and the growing wave of attacks on *madrasas*, on the other, is today forcing the authorities at Deoband to consider introducing limited reforms in their syllabus and methods of administration. Thanks to the flood of journalists who flocked to Deoband in the wake of the events of 11 September 2001, looking out for material to make a good story, Deoband now has two new departments, of English and of computer applications. The media hype about the Deobandi connections of the Taliban is said to have forced the authorities of the *madrasa* to relent and finally allow some of their students to learn English and computers so that they could answer the journalists and set at rest their fears of the *madrasa*'s alleged, although unsubstantiated, charges of involvement in 'terrorism'.[16] Today, the *madrasa* has arrangements for 25 students who have passed the *fazil* course to study in each of the two new departments. The *madrasa* has also launched a media cell to document media reports on Islam and Muslim issues, to liaison with journalists and to prepare reports and articles on issues related to the *madrasas*. Several leading Deobandi authorities are now themselves calling for Muslims to take to both religious as well as modern education, exhorting them to set up both *madrasas* as well as 'modern' schools wherein arrangements should be made for the proper Islamic education of their children. Contrary to the image of all Deobandis as hardcore conservatives and vehemently opposed to change, many Deobandis today would readily concur with Maulana Muhammad Aslam

Qasmi, teacher of Hadith at Deoband, when he insists that Muslims must to take to both 'modern' as well as Islamic education, 'in a balanced way'.[17]

The interesting changes that are slowly making their presence felt in Deoband are not an isolated exception. In actual fact, voices for change in the *madrasas*, which have been gaining strength in recent years, are not in themselves particularly new. The urgent need for *madrasas* to reform has been consistently articulated by Muslim reformers, including many 'ulama themselves, right from colonial times, although the actual pace of reform in the *madrasa* has been slow and halting and the limits and actual content of the reform programme are still hotly debated.[18] In a recent survey, Siddiqui discovered that the majority of the over 450 *madrasas* that he studied in Delhi were in favour of curricular reform and the teaching of 'modern' subjects, at least in the elementary classes.[19] Likewise, Qamruddin, in his survey of 576 *madrasas* across the country, estimated that over 96 per cent of the *madrasas* were in favour of the introduction of 'modern' subjects in order to ensure a better future for their students.[20] Yet, despite this widespread desire for reform, as Muhammad Qasim Zaman rightly notes, 'The significance of the initiatives towards reforming the *madrasa* itself remains to be appreciated'.[21]

In South Asia today, advocates for reform in the *madrasa* system include both trained 'ulama, products of *madrasas*, as well as men who have been educated in 'modern' schools, including self-defined Islamists and Muslim 'modernists'. Some of them have studied in *madrasas* and have then gone on to received higher education in regular universities. Others might be traditionally-trained 'ulama, whose sons have studied in universities and have then joined them to help improve the functioning of their *madrasas*, a phenomenon increasingly common in India today. It is important, however, not to exaggerate the differences between the categories of 'traditionalists', 'Islamists' and 'modernists'. While these categories may be useful for heuristic purposes, in actual fact they do not exist as separate, neatly identifiable types. Rather, they represent a wide range of opinions with one shading almost imperceptibly into the other. It is often the case that an individual, who, for instance, could be defined as overall a 'traditionalist', might express 'modernist' or 'Islamist' sympathies in some significant regard.

Islamists, Muslim 'Modernists' and Madrasa Reform

Voices for *madrasa* reform reflect a wide range of community agendas. Advocates of reform represent considerably different political positions, from those who see themselves as completely apolitical, to those who feel that reform is needed in order to integrate madrasa students into the wider society, to those who insist on reform in the belief that it is only by combining Islamic with 'modern',

particularly scientific, education, that Muslims can be empowered. Advocates of 'modernisation' of the *madrasas* share with their opponents a commitment to the Islamic tradition and present their schemes for 'modernized' *madrasas* as a return to the 'authentic' tradition as represented by the Prophet and his companions, rather than as a radical departure from it. The very notion of the 'authentic' Islamic tradition, being a social construct and an ongoing, constantly evolving project, is itself fiercely contested. Thus, different versions of what constitutes the 'authentic' Islamic tradition are put forward and debated in the course of advocating *madrasa* reforms.

Advocates for the introduction of 'modern' subjects in the *madrasa* curriculum are also aware of the limits of reform, and there is considerable debate about how far reform should proceed. This tension centres on the perceived role and function of the *madrasa*. Those who see the *madrasas* as aimed at training students as religious professionals argue that 'modern' subjects should be allowed only insofar as they might help their students understand and interpret Islam in the light of 'modern' knowledge. Others, recognizing that not all the graduates of the *madrasas* might be able or even want to become professional '*ulama*, have suggested the creation of two streams of education in the *madrasas*. In the first stream, students who want just a modicum of religious education and then would prefer to 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 '*ulama*, and would focus on 'religious' subjects, teaching 'modern' disciplines only to the extent necessary for them to interpret Islam in the light of contemporary needs. A vocal minority insists, on the other hand, that an entirely new system of education must take the place of the traditional *madrasas*, where a unified syllabus, based on a harmonious blend of 'religious' 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. Some go so far as to suggest that the larger *madrasas*, after being suitably reformed, be converted into universities funded by the state, with the smaller *madrasas* being affiliated to them. This, however, is not a widely shared view.[22] More acceptable is the suggestion that *madrasa* education be reformed in such a way that allows *madrasa* graduates to join regular universities after they finish their basic religious course.

While advocates of reform seem agreed on the importance of the *madrasas* 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 that they advocate as well as the rationales that they offer to put forward their case. There seems, however, a consensus that the core of the reform project should consist of modification in the syllabus and the methods of teaching, particular stress being given to the teaching of 'modern' subjects, such

as mathematics, the social and the natural sciences and languages such as English and Hindi. New books for teaching 'religious' subjects, and the excision of certain subjects and texts considered outdated or irrelevant in today's context are also generally advocated. Although some proponents of reform go so far as to call for new ways of imagining Islamic theology and law, these are clearly in a minority.

The reformists' rationale for introducing 'modern' disciplines in the *madrasas* is framed in principally four ways. Firstly, 'modernisation' is said to be a recovery of the 'authentic', holistic Islamic understanding of knowledge as all embracing, covering both worship as well as social relations and worldly pursuits, knowledge of God and of His creation. Secondly, it is said to be indispensable in order that the '*ulama* may recover what is seen as their fast declining authority as spokespersons of Islam. Thirdly, it is expressed as a necessary means for Muslims to prosper in this world, in addition to the next. Finally, it is seen as essential in order for the '*ulama* to engage in *tabligh*, or Islamic missionary work. All these tie in with a new, more activist understanding of the role of the '*ulama*. The '*ulama* are no longer to remain restricted to teaching in the *madrasas*. Rather, armed with 'modern', in addition to 'traditional', knowledge, they are to play an important role as leaders of the community.

Modernisation and 'Islamic Knowledge'

In the writings of the reformists, Islam's position on universal education is seen as setting it apart from and above all other faiths. While other religions, such as Judaism and Hinduism, see knowledge as the close preserve of a small priesthood, Islam is said to stress the need 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. The Church is accused of fierce hostility to science and reason and is said to have enjoyed a long history of persecuting scientists. Unlike Christianity, it is argued, Islam does not enjoin blind faith, but, rather, a faith based on reason. Further, in contrast to Christianity, Islam is said to be against monasticism and renunciation of the world. 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.[23] Hence, scientific development is said to have occurred on a grand scale at a time when Islamic civilisation was at its zenith, because of, rather than, as in the Christian case, despite, the deep-rooted influence of religion. Thus, the great achievements of early medieval Muslim scientists, in a range of fields, including medicine, astronomy, physics, mathematics, biology and engineering, are said to have owed essentially to the encouragement provided by Islam to explore the world

as a 'sign' of God's majesty. These scientists are said to have been pious Muslims themselves, seeing their own scientific work as entirely in keeping with the teachings of Islam. It is 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. In fact, modern science is said to have its roots in the medieval Islamic tradition.[24] Hence, reformists argue, for present-day '*ulama* 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, and constitutes a return to their authentic roots. In fact, modern science, if studied cleansed of its 'un-Islamic' associations, can only help further strengthen the Muslims' faith in Islam, it is claimed. On the other hand, if the '*ulama* continue to ignore the importance of 'modern' knowledge, they would, they are warned, 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.

Reformists see Islamic knowledge as a comprehensive whole. By denying the distinction between 'religious' (*dini*) and 'worldly' (*duniyavi*) knowledge, reformists advocate an alternate way of classifying knowledge, dividing all forms of knowledge into two categories: 'useful' and 'harmful'. The former, consisting of all knowledge that leads to piety as well as worldly and social welfare, is to be willingly embraced. The latter, knowledge that leads to irreligiousness and immorality, is to be rejected. In support of this stance a *hadith* is often quoted, according to which Muhammad is said to have prayed to God, seeking 'beneficial knowledge from Him' and beseeching Him to protect him from 'such knowledge as is not beneficial'.[25] In this way of imagining the scope of Islamic knowledge, Islam is seen to cover every sphere of life, from the most personal relations to collective affairs of the state and society. Accordingly, Islamic knowledge is regarded as all embracing, a logical outcome of the central Islamic notion of *tauhid*, the oneness of God.[26] If God is one, his creation is one, and so, too, are the various forms of knowledge needed to understand both the world and God. Since all spheres of legitimate knowledge are 'Islamic', it is argued, *madrasas* must not restrict themselves simply to the teaching of the Qur'an, Hadith, *fiqh* and so on. Rather, 'modern' subjects must also be taught, albeit after suitably 'Islamising' them, cleansing them from the irreligious underpinnings of western epistemology and reconstituting them in a broad Islamic framework.[27] If Muslims are able to do this, writes an Indian Muslim scholar, they would produce leading Muslim philosophers, scientists and thinkers who would be 'the envy of the world'. Such a system of education, he claims, would provide for the worldly as well as religious needs of Muslim students, training them to become 'perfect human beings' (*insan ul-kamil*).[28]

The 'Islamisation of knowledge' project thus represents a creative effort to

promote a specifically Islamic form of modernity. It also reflects an intense desire to define Islam in modern terms and to fortify the faith of Muslims faced with the unenviable reality of living in a world where many of them see themselves as increasingly marginalised.[29] The assertion that Islamic knowledge is all-embracing in its scope, and the claim that Islam governs all spheres of life, possessing a solution to every problem, serves as a powerful rhetorical device to stress the claim of the continuing relevance of Islam today as a comprehensive social system and to counter the appeal of alternate ways of imaging the world At the same time, it also provides suitable Islamic legitimacy for the *madrasa* students who wish to acquire 'modern' education.

Madrasa Reform and the Worldly Prospects of the 'Ulama

Advocates for reform see the present syllabus used in most South Asian *madrasas*, 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. This notion is thus based on the understanding of practical 'usefulness', with much of what *madrasas* today teach no longer being considered 'useful' or 'relevant'. While it is recognized that the *dars-i nizami* did indeed produce its share of brilliant scholars, it is also stressed that it was a product of a particular society and ways of understanding the world, suited to the particular social and administrative needs of its times. Now, however, that social conditions have changed drastically and human knowledge has vastly expanded, the *madrasa* curriculum must, it is stressed, correspondingly change, in order that *madrasas* can provide a 'useful' and 'relevant' education.[30] This is regarded as particularly important for the future economic prospects of *madrasa* students.

The notion of 'useful' knowledge is itself a novel one, and one that can be traced to colonial discourse about what constituted appropriate learning. The classical '*ulama* insisted, as many 'traditionalist' '*ulama* indeed still do, on the central importance of 'pure intention' (*sahih niyyat*) in the acquisition of knowledge. The quest for knowledge was, ideally, seen as being motivated simply to acquire God's favour, and students were sternly warned against any base or worldly motives. Knowledge, it was stressed, was a divine gift, and should only be used to do God's will, not as a means for worldly advancement. Yet, today, numerous Muslim scholars, including even some 'traditionalist' '*ulama*, are arguing precisely for the need for *madrasas* to seriously consider the worldly prospects of their students and to take these into account in framing their curricula.

The 'useful' knowledge that is sought to be included in the *madrasa* curriculum is variously described by different advocates of reform. Generally, it includes the basics of modern natural and physical sciences, as well as Hindi and English. Often, the need for inclusion of these subjects is stressed in manner that accords

with the classical notion of 'pure intention', and does not appear as motivated by worldly concerns on the part of the '*ulama*. It is sometimes expressed as a means to help salvage the sagging prestige of the '*ulama* and reinforcing their moral authority. Thus, for instance, a Deobandi graduate writes that since the '*ulama* lack a knowledge of basic Hindi or English, they often 'feel humiliated' when they 'step out of the four walls of their *madrasas*', 'having to depend on others for even such small things as filling out a train reservation form'. This leads to a loss of prestige on the part of the '*ulama*, auguring ill for Islam.[31] It is thus stressed that unless 'modern' subjects are added to the curriculum, enabling *madrasa* students to remain abreast of contemporary developments, there is little to stop the growing irrelevance of the '*ulama* in the eyes of the general Muslim public.[32]

For many advocates of madrasa reform, including, though not only, the Islamists, 'modernisation' is proposed as a means to do away or at least reduce with the rigid dualism sets modern educated Muslims apart from the traditional '*ulama*. If the *madrasas* were to incorporate modern subjects into their curriculum they might also succeed in attracting students from better-off families to enroll in them and thus not only help undermine the existing educational dualism, but also improve the standards of the *madrasas* and, as one '*alim* suggests, the moral standards of the students.[33] Incorporating 'modern' subjects into the *madrasa* curriculum is also seen as particularly urgent given the increasingly visible and strident Hinduisation of the 'secular' education system. In order to rescue Muslim children studying in 'modern' schools from Hinduisation and 'intellectual apostasy', it is suggested, *madrasas* need to incorporate 'modern' subjects so that their parents might be willing to send their children to study there instead and thereby prevent them from going astray. In this way, the appeal for *madrasa* reform is inextricably linked to broader concerns for maintenance of community boundaries and identities. It is also related to efforts on the part of the '*ulama* to reach out to modern educated Muslims, who are seen as having virtually abandoned the faith, in an effort to bring them 'back' to Islam. It is recognized that it is only by familiarizing themselves with the developments in the contemporary world that '*ulama* can relate to and influence 'modern' educated Muslims and help them to lead a more proper 'Islamic' life. In other words, it is seen as enabling the '*ulama* to extend and reinforce their authority over 'modern' educated Muslims, who are regarded as having lost their faith in and respect for them. As some Islamists envisage it, this attempt at building bridges between the '*ulama* and 'modern' educated Muslims Islamists would finally result in dissolving their separate identities, leading to the formation of a new class of '*ulama*, firmly rooted in the Islamic tradition but, at the same time, fully capable of functioning in the modern world. As a Deobandi '*alim* puts it, it seeks to 'put an end to the war between the mister and the maulvi'.[34]

Introducing 'modern' subjects in the *madrasas* is also seen as providing *madrasa* students with substantial real-world benefits. Given the fact that *madrasa* teachers are often poorly paid and that the career prospects of *madrasa* graduates are limited and not particularly lucrative, this is a particularly pressing concern for many advocates of reform. Reforming the *madrasa* curriculum is regarded as essential in order to deal with a central problem for many *madrasa* students, that of employment in an economy for which they have little or no training. The problem of suitable employment for *madrasa* graduates has now become a particularly serious one. With independence in 1947, the absorption of Muslim-ruled princely states and the eclipse of the Muslim feudal nobility, numerous *madrasas* and 'ulama* lost valuable sources of patronage. The problem has only been made worse in the face of general Muslim economic backwardness and the rapid increase in the numbers of students coming out of the growing number of *madrasas* each year.

Many 'ulama* have responded to the question by dismissing it altogether. *Madrasas* are meant, they stress, for the training of religious specialists, not petty clerks. *Madrasa* students, they insist, should have no care for where and how they would earn their livelihood, for God shall provide for them.[35] It also often argued that religious knowledge should be sought for its own sake, and not as a means for worldly advancement.[36] Thus the student's intention (*niyyat*) should be pure and unsullied of any worldly motives. His duty is simply to dedicate himself completely to the acquisition of knowledge of the faith and serve God. Following the 'pious ancestors' (*salaf-i saleh*), he must lead a simple and austere life, and must depend solely on God for his livelihood, placing full trust in Him. Despite the widespread reluctance to discuss the issue, some writers, including many 'ulama* themselves, today recognize that employment is indeed a fundamental concern for *madrasa* students, most of who come from poor families, and are sent to the *madrasas* by their parents in the hope that on graduation they would be able to earn a livelihood as imams in mosques or teachers in *maktabs* and *madrasas*. They see the introduction of modern education as important in helping to address the problem of acute unemployment among *madrasa* graduates, because, they argue, the existing avenues of employment for them, mainly as teachers in *madrasas* or imams and *muezzins* in mosques, is limited. If *madrasas* were to include basic 'modern' education, it is suggested, their students might would be able to later enroll in colleges and then could aspire for new avenues of employment. It is also stressed that if *madrasa* graduates are thereby able to financially support themselves, they would also cease being a burden on the community.[38] Several advocates of reform suggest that *madrasas* introduce technical and vocational training for some of their students who do not wish to train as religious professionals in order that they might be able to earn a respectable livelihood once they leave the *madrasa*.[39]

Critique of Existing Madrasa Curriculum

Calls for *madrasa* reform include both the introduction of 'modern' subjects in the *madrasa* curriculum as well as the removal of subjects or books considered to be 'irrelevant' or no longer 'useful'. Reformists argue that since the conditions of the world are in constant change, so, too, must the curriculum of the *madrasas* constantly evolve if *madrasas* are to continue to maintain their relevance. In fact, they point out, the *madrasa* system has always responded to changes in the wider society. Change, however, it is argued, must be selective and carefully controlled, and it must not result in transforming the *madrasa* completely out of existence or threaten what is seen as their specifically 'religious' character. Rather, while taking into account new developments and responding accordingly, the *madrasas* must continue to work to preserve, promote and transmit the Islamic tradition, for that is said to be their primary function.

This controlled project of reform is based on a distinction that is made between two forms of knowledge on which the *madrasa* syllabus is based: the 'transmitted' and the 'rational' sciences. While the former are seen as immutable and valid for all time, being of divine origin, the latter are regarded as human products, which, therefore, can be reformed, removed or replaced. While the former are an end in themselves, the latter are regarded as simply a means for acquiring knowledge of the former. Accordingly, reformists argue, the 'rational' sciences in the included in the existing *madrasa* curriculum must be replaced in order that students might be able to gain a better understanding of the primary sources of Islam, for in a changed world, these sciences, products of an age long past, are no longer adequate or properly intelligible.[44]

Besides the 'rational' sciences of philosophy and logic, certain other subjects included in the present *madrasa* system are also regarded by numerous advocates of reform as unnecessary and in urgent need of reform or removal. One of these is the teaching of *ikhtilafiyat*, the discipline of disproving other groups (*maslaks*) as 'un-Islamic'. *Ikhtilifiyat* forms a central component of the syllabus in several *madrasas* today, for each *maslak* and its associated *madrasas* regards as one of its primary functions the refutation of other Muslim groups, this serving to stress its own claims to Islamic authenticity. Those who see the teaching of *ikhtilafiyat* as unnecessary and even dangerous often complain that many *madrasas* play an inordinate role in promoting intra-Muslim conflicts by teaching their students to condemn all Muslim groups other than their own as virtually outside the pale of Islam. They suggest that books that tend to promote hatred against other Muslim groups should be excised from the syllabus.

Another contentious issue that is repeatedly discussed in the writings of the

advocates of reform is the issue of *fiqh. Fiqh* constitutes the core of the *madrasa* syllabus. It also forms the mainstay of the authority of the 'ulama. A number of reformists who have pleaded for revision in the teaching of *fiqh* in the *madrasas* have called for the necessity of inclusion of 'modern' subjects in the *madrasa* curriculum in order to develop a new *fiqh* attuned to the particular context of contemporary India. This is because, they stress, the classical 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. Further, many of the books on *fiqh*, as well as other subjects, that are still taught in the *madrasas* are said to consist simply of commentaries upon commentaries or simply marginal footnotes, written in an archaic style and language. Many of these commentaries are said to further complicate what the original books teach, rather than explain them. Several of these books are said to promote 'heated verbal debates and quarrels and strife' and, hence, 'cannot open the minds of the students'.[45] Hence, new, more easily comprehendible books on *fiqh* should take their place, dealing with issues of contemporary concern and related to practical realities.[46]

For this new Islamic jurisprudence that advocates of reform seek to formulate, *ijtihad* or the skills of deducing rulings for new situations and problems from the Qur'an and Hadith is stressed. For this, it is suggested, the focus of the teaching of *fiqh* should shift from the details of jurisprudence (*fur'u*) to the principles of law ('*usul*).[47]One writer even suggests that *madrasas* familiarize their students with international law and comparative legal systems, in order to 'meet modern challenges'.[48] Another leading '*alim*, associated with the Jama'at-i Islami, recommends that in order to break the stranglehold of *taqlid* and inter-*maslak* prejudices, *madrasa* students must be familiarised with the *fiqh* of other Muslim schools of jurisprudence. He insists on the need for *ijtihad* based on a thorough study of the *usul-i fiqh* to deal with issues that the medieval compendia of *fiqh* either do not mention or do so in terms that are irrelevant today, including such subjects as religious pluralism, women's rights and social justice for oppressed peoples.[49]

Advocates of *madrasa* reform have also written extensively on the need for a change in the teaching of the core subject of *tafsir* or Qur'anic commentary. The original *dars-i nizami* devoted little attention to Qur'anic commentary, because it was envisaged as a syllabus to train government bureaucrats rather than religious specialists. Many Indian *madrasas* continue to pay scant attention to *tafsir*, teaching for the subject only a few texts by early medieval commentators that are now widely recognized as inadequate. Reform in the teaching of *tafsir* is generally articulated in two principal ways. Firstly, it is argued that the Qur'an is a simple, easily understandable book of practical guidance. Hence, it must be approached directly, rather than with the help of 'outdated' commentaries. Secondly, it is often argued that all commentaries naturally bear the imprint of

their authors and their own socio-historical location. While the medieval *tafsir* literature is not dismissed as completely useless, it is argued that their authors were, after all, human beings and not infallible. Hence, it is stressed, no interpretation of God's word can be said to be absolute or to actually represent God's intention in its entirety. Conceding that every interpretation of the text is partial and limited, some writers suggest that new commentaries, written by modern-day scholars, and taking cognizance of modern developments in knowledge, should take the place of 'outdated' commentaries, although this does not mean that the medieval *tafsirs* must be totally neglected. This plea for reform is presented as a means for expressing the continuing relevance of the Qur'an in our day. It is also seen as a proof of the Qur'an's divine nature, for if the Qur'an provides suitable guidance for constantly changing conditions it must indeed be of divine provenance.

Coordination Between Different Madrasas

Most *madrasas* function as independent bodies, run by their own management committees. Even in the case of the several thousand Deobandi *madrasas* in the country, each *madrasa* is autonomous in matters of administration, although the various *madrasas* share a similar ideology and commitment to what may be called a common Deobandi vision. Every *madrasa* is, in theory, free to formulate its own syllabus, select its own books, set its own standards, and conduct its own examinations. Because of this, and owing also to fierce inter-*maslak* rivalries, there exists no central coordinating body for all *madrasas*. This poses major problems in such matters as formulating policies for the reform of the *madrasa* syllabus, improving educational standards, exchanging students between different *madrasas*, promoting unity among different Muslim groups and combating various challenges that the *madrasas* see themselves as collectively faced with. That the continued existence of sharp inter-*maslak* differences dooms all efforts to reform of the *madrasa* system as a whole has long been recognized. Writing in the early years of the twentieth century, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad bitterly castigated the '*ulama* of his days for their constant rivalries, going so far as to write, 'It may be possible for reptiles to live in a common habitat, but among the '*ulama* one individual cannot agree to live in peaceful coexistence with another. Like dogs, they fight with sharp claws and teeth whenever a bone is thrown at them'.[50] In a more controlled manner, Tahir Mahmud, a leading Indian legal specialist, makes the same point:

> It is naïve to expect [that] the '*ulama* of India, having such tremendous differences, would unanimously agree on a single item of reform, if at all they agree to discuss it […] In India, each group of '*ulama* […] has its own interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. They will take ages to express a unanimous opinion on any reform to be applied to all Muslims alike.[51]

A number of Muslim writers have called for efforts to build bridges between different *madrasas* as part of a broader programme for madrasa reform. Thus, Muhammad Zafiruddin Miftahi, a mufti associated with the Dar ul-'Ulum, Deoband, suggests that all Sunni madrasas, barring those run by the Barelwis, should come together under one all-India *madrasa* board, with branches at the state, district and local levels. The proposed board would be charged with the responsibility of preparing a common syllabus for the 'transmitted' sciences, while each *madrasa* would be left free to choose to teach the 'modern' subjects that it wants. In order to gain general acceptance, the board would consist of 'ulama of various Sunni schools.[52] Another leading '*alim*, Maulana Muhammad Shams Tabrez, appeals to all Muslim *maslaks*, including even the Barelwis, to set up a single *madrasa* federation which would set up a common syllabus for all *madrasas* and which could work for their collective welfare. The board would set common standards and conduct common examinations for the *madrasas* under it.[53]

Given the fierce rivalries between *madrasas* of different *maslaks*, efforts to unite the *madrasas* under a common board have proved unsuccessful. *Madrasas*, like other such institutions, cherish their autonomy, and many would regard control by a leading to undue interference. Increasingly, however, leading *madrasas* of each *maslak* are moving towards setting up loose federations in order to streamline educational standards and examination procedures. In recent years, the growing fear and threat of interference by the state and attacks on the *madrasas* by extremist Hindu groups has further boosted the process, leading *madrasas* of each *maslak* to seek to consolidate their ranks so as to more effectively respond to moves to control or regulate them. Separate federations have been formed, among others, by the Dar ul-Ulum, Deoband, the Nadwat ul-'Ulama, Lucknow, the Ahl-i Hadith Jami'at us-Salafiya, Varanasi, and the leading Barelwi *madrasa* in the country, the Jami'at ul-Ashrafiya, Mubarakpur. Each federation is headed by an amir, generally the principal of the apex *madrasa*, and member *madrasas* all belong to the same *maslak*. Regular meetings are organized to chalk out plans and projects and to discuss common problems and concerns.

Reforms in Teaching Methods

Besides reforms in the curriculum of the *madrasas*, reformists have written extensively on the need for suitable changes in their methods of teaching. Many are critical of the 'book-centred', rather than student-centred', approach to education in the *madrasas*, which places, as they see it, inordinate stress on parroting entire sections of books without exercising reason or critical thought. As a result, few students are said to actually properly comprehend what they are taught. Even after years of pouring over ancient Arabic tomes, hardly any *madrasa* graduates, writes a Deobandi '*alim*, are able properly speak the language,

having simply memorized a few sentences or chapters.[54] This problem is said to be exacerbated by the inordinate stress that most *madrasas* give to the study of particular books, which generally takes the form of memorization, as opposed to the actual learning of a particular subject or discipline.[55] Many *madrasa* managers and teachers are said to sternly prohibit their students from reading books written by Muslim scholars of other *maslaks* and, indeed, any books outside the prescribed syllabus 'which they believe might create doubts in their minds about the aims of the madrasas'.[56]

While the merits of some aspects of the traditional pedagogic styles and approaches are recognized, it is stressed that *madrasas* must be open to learning new teaching methods from others, including from 'modern', secular institutions. Such proposals are wide-ranging, and include the introduction of new methods of language learning that are used in universities, encouraging students to debate and discuss various issues, training them to write for newspapers, and organizing cultural programmes in order to broaden the vision of the students. Some writers suggest the need for text-based learning to be combined with practical learning activities, such as various forms of social work and inter-faith dialogue programmes. Through such efforts, it is argued, *madrasa* students would be made more aware of the world around them, which, in turn, would help them to be more effective in their future work as religious leaders. It would salvage the sagging prestige of the '*ulama*, by making them more relevant to people's daily concerns. At the same time it would also help *madrasa* students develop a more contextually grounded and relevant understanding of the faith.[57]

In recent years some *madrasas* have made considerable headway in reforming pedagogical methods. For instance, the Jami'at ul-Falah, Azamgarh, now has a number of teachers, almost all *madrasa* products, with a bachelor's degree in education. At the Islamic Centre, Lucknow, the English teacher has a degree from the prestigious Central Institute for English and Foreign languages, Hyderabad. Exposed to new teaching methods in such institutions, such teachers might be induced to reform traditional teaching methods, although this has, till date, been slow in happening. An innovative experiment that might prove a major catalyst in this regard is the *madrasa* teachers' training center that the Jami'at ul-Hidaya, one of the most progressive *madrasas* in the country, proposes to start in the near future. So far no such regular institution exists, although organizations such as the Uttar Pradesh Falah-i 'Am Trust, Lucknow, the Ta'mir-i Millat, Hyderabad, the Samastha Kerala Sunni Vidyavasa Board, Calicut, and the Centre for Promotion of Science, Aligarh, occasionally organize short-term training camps for *madrasa* teachers where they are familiarized with new methods of teaching.[58] Likewise, the Jami'a Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and the Aligarh Muslim University have organized some similar courses in recent years.[59]

The Pace of Reform

Given the world-view of the 'traditionalist' 'ulama, and the vested interests involved in maintaining the madrasa system as it is, it is hardly surprising that the actual pace of reform of madrasa education in India has been slow and halting. In the absence of mechanisms to make the madrasas accountable to the community, change in the madrasa system has been piecemeal and ad hoc, rather than wide-ranging and well planned. Since each madrasa is an autonomous institution, its curriculum being set by its own management body, reform in the system has depended, so far, almost entirely on individual initiative. In most cases this is done by the management body on its own, often on the personal whim of its principal or rector. Only a few madrasas have actively sought to involve academics from universities and trained educationists in reforming their curriculum. Typically, the involvement of outsiders in helping curricular reform is seen as threatening to open the doors of 'irreligious' interference that would threaten the very 'religious' identity of the madrasa. Critics, however, argue that this opposition to has actually more to do with the threat that the managers of the madrasas perceive to their own positions of authority if they were to allow university-trained specialists, even if Muslims, a say in running their institutions.

The slow pace of change in the madrasa system might seem frustrating to advocates of reform. Yet, it needs to be understood with sensitivity, for critics of the madrasa system often ignore the important positive contributions that many madrasas are actually making in the field of Muslim education today and the critical financial and other constraints that they face. For the poor in India often the only available and affordable form of education is provided by the government school system. The standard of education provided in government schools, as the government itself concedes, is woefully pathetic. Teachers rarely make an appearance, and if they do they spend little time actually teaching. Although government schools provide, in theory, free education, poor families often find it difficult to meet the costs for clothing, books and food for their children. In many madrasas, on the other hand, these are provided free of cost.

The actual contribution of the madrasas can thus be better appreciated when they are seen in contrast to the functioning of the government schools. As a Muslim journalist points out:

> A poor Muslim child has only two options to receive some sort of education. He could either go to a government school, where he would probably learn next to nothing, or else to a madrasa. At least in the madrasa he would receive free education, board and lodging, books and clothes. Classes in madrasas are held regularly and teachers generally take a keen interest in their students. At the madrasa the student would learn at least

two languages, probably a modicum of mathematics and other modern subjects. He would also learn the value of discipline, proper use of time, personal hygiene, respect for elders, honesty, good morals and hard work, all of which may be entirely new things for children coming from poor rural families. One cannot understand the role of the *madrasas* without taking all this into consideration. Yes, I admit that a lot needs to be done to reform the *madrasa* as it is at present, but before criticizing it for its faults or for its slowness in changing, you must recognize the difficult conditions under which they work as well as the valuable services that they are rendering to poor children.

Likewise, an '*alim* who admits that there is much scope for reform in the *madrasas* argues:

> When talking about reform in the madrasas, it is important to remember that had it not been for the *madrasas* thousands upon thousands of Muslim children would be roaming the streets, begging or doing no work, turning into criminals. It is true that there is much that is wrong with the *madrasa* system, but who can deny that by educating so many poor Muslim children and training them to become good, responsible and law-abiding citizens they have made an immense contribution to the country and have also relieved the government of an immense burden that it would need to have shouldered to educate them? While *madrasas* should be thanked for this task, they are unfortunately and wrongly being reviled as hideouts of terrorists today.

In seeking to evaluate the actual pace of reform in the *madrasa* system, it is also important to bear in mind the considerable financial constraints under which most *madrasas* operate. Many of them might wish to provide a better education for their students and even to teach 'modern' subjects, but are unable to do so for want of the necessary funds. Recruiting good teachers for 'modern' subjects is often difficult, if not impossible, for many *madrasas*, even if they would like to, for they cannot afford the high salaries that such teachers demand. Linked to this is the broader issue of the social background of the vast majority of the managers, teachers and students of the *madrasas*. Most *madrasa* managers and teachers come from poor or lower middle-class families, with little or no exposure to modern forms of knowledge and teaching methods. Being themselves products of 'traditional' *madrasas*, they have been taught to believe that many aspects of modernity represent a revolt against Islam. Not surprisingly, reform is thus often seen as an invitation to treason and apostasy. Like most other religious specialists, the essential task of the '*ulama* is to preserve a received tradition and not to innovate or experiment. Hence, to expect the '*ulama* to wholeheartedly embrace reform is unrealistic and impractical.

In the case of most *madrasa* students, too, their social origins often inhibit any enthusiasm for making demands for reform. Most of them come from poor families and they are wholly dependent on the *madrasa* for their education and living expenses. To demand reform in the *madrasa* system is a risky proposition that few students could dare to consider, for generally this would invite expulsion. Modern-educated middle-class Muslims have themselves taken little interest in the reform of the *madrasas*, often viewing them as obscurantist and as beyond redemption. Few well-off families would choose to send their children to a *madrasa* to train as a professional '*alim*. Even among the poor, a *madrasa*-trained '*alim* claims, it is generally those children who are either dull or quarrelsome who are sent to *madrasas*, the others being often sent to government or private schools if the family can afford it.[60] Being thus characterized by a largely poor and deprived student composition, *madrasas* often remain insulated from winds of change and reform that a more diverse student population might have engendered.

Further hampering efforts to reform the *madrasa* system is the widespread and growing perception among the '*ulama* and the Muslim community in India more generally of a grave threat to Islam and Muslims from militant anti-Muslim Hindu chauvinist forces. This fear naturally dampens enthusiasm reform and only serves to further strengthen the forces of Muslim conservatism and opponents of change. In such a surcharged climate, suggestions for reform of *madrasas* often are understood as hidden ploys by the 'enemies' to destroy Islam by diluting their religious character.

Although, as we have seen, reformists, including many '*ulama* themselves, have advocated wide-ranging reforms in the 'traditionalist' *madrasa* system, in actual fact reform has been largely limited to the introduction of some new texts and subjects and the excision of others that are no longer seen as 'useful'. In other words, reform has, so far, been peripheral, rather than structural or basic. Many *madrasas* 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. In recent years several *madrasas* in India have introduced the teaching of selected 'modern' subjects, including basic English, and elementary social and natural sciences, along with Hindi and, in some cases, a regional language. However, in general the standard of teaching of these subjects leaves much to be desired. Often these subjects are not taken seriously by the teachers as well as the students, being considered relatively unimportant as compared to 'Islamic' subjects. In many *madrasas* these subjects are taught by teachers who themselves are traditionally trained '*ulama*, with little or no exposure to modern knowledge and teaching methods.

Overall, then, change is taking place within the four walls of many *madrasas* in the country, although, lamentably, this is not often highlighted in media accounts. The changes that are occurring might no constitute a radical or structural reform in themselves, but they are surely a sign that *madrasas* are increasingly open to the possibility of reform today. The way this change unfolds depends not only on the 'ulama of the *madrasas* alone, but on the role and attitude of the state and the general political environment in the country as a whole as well. Obviously, for this to happen the state must be seen by the 'ulama to be sincerely committed to Muslim educational advancement and to countering Hindu extremist groups, whose virulent anti-Muslim agenda includes relentless attacks on the *madrasa* system. It does not take much imagination to realize that in a climate of extreme communal polarization and in the face of violent attacks on Muslims, as in Gujarat recently, calls for reforms of the *madrasas* will have few takers among the 'ulama. While the 'ulama and the managers of the *madrasas* as well as Muslim social activists thus have a major role to play in the *madrasa* reform process, so too do the state and groups working for inter-communal harmony.

Footnotes

[1] Quoted in Javed Ashraf Qasmi, *Faizan-i Dar ul-'Ulum Deoband*, Ghaseda: Madrasa Abi bin Ka'ab Tahaffuz al-Qur'an al-Karim, 2000, p.92.

[2] 'Abid Reza Bedar, in '*Arabi Islami Madaris Ka Nisab-o-Nizam-i Ta'lim Aur 'Asri Taqaze* (vol.1), Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1995, p.8.

[3] Anwar 'Ali, 'Madaris-i Diniya Aur Hukumati Control' (part ii), *Qaumi Awaz*, 19 June, 2002.

[4] Quoted in Shaukat 'Ali Qasmi, *Rabita-i Madaris-i'Arabia Dar ul-'Ulum: Qayyam, Ijtima'at, Sargarmiyan*, Deoband: Dar ul-'Ulum, 1998, p22.

[5] Quoted in Muhammad Zaid Mazhari Nadwi, *al-'Ilm wa'l 'Ulama*, Hathaura: Idara-i Ifadat-i Ashrafiya, 1996, p.110.

[6] Mumshad 'Ali Qasmi*, Tarikh-i Dars-i Nizami*, Bilaspur, Muzaffarnagar: Majm'a al-Bahath al-'Ilmiya, 1994, p.71.

[7] 'Dar ul-'Ulum Deoband Zer-i Ehtimam Ijtima-i Madaris-i Islamiya Ka Ineqad', *Tarjuman-i Dar ul-'Ulum*, November, 1994, p.11.

[8] Ibid., p.13.

[9] Ibid., p.12.

[10] Quoted in Javed Ashraf Qasmi, *Faizan-i Dar ul-'Ulum Deoband*, Ghaseda: Madrasa Abi bin Ka'ab Tahaffuz al-Qur'an al-Karim, 2000, p.92.

[11] '*Amali Programme Tanzim Abna ul-Qadim Dar ul-'Ulum Deoband*, Delhi: Tanzim Abna ul-Qadim Dar ul-'Ulum Deoband, n.d., pp.1-7.

[12] Zain ul-Sajid bin Qasmi, 'Dars-i Nizami: Tarikhi Pas-i Manzar Aur Jadid Taqaze', *Tarjuman-i Dar ul-'Ulum*, November, 1994.

[13] Thanwi is said to have argued for the inclusion of Sanskrit in the madrasa curriculum in order to 'spread Islam among the Hindus' and to 'rebut the Hindu scriptures'. Likewise, he is said to have recommended the learning of 'the languages and sciences of the infidels (*kuffar*) and the people of falsehood (*ahl-i batil*) in order to debate with them' (See, 'Islah-i Nisab Ke Liye Maulana Thanwi Ki Chand Tajawiz', *Tarjuman-i Dar ul-'Ulum,* June, 1994, pp.14-15.

[14] 'Abdur Rahim 'Abid, 'Madaris Ke Nisab Mai Tabdili Ka Masla: 'Ulama Kya Kahtey Hain?', *Tarjuman-i Dar ul-'Ulum*, October, 1994, p.20.

[15] http://www.islaminterfaith.org/august2003/interview.html#interview2

[16] This was finally made possible despite severe opposition from certain conservatives. Waris Mazhari says that they argued that it would lead the students astray from the path of religion, claiming that it was 'a cunning and sinister ploy to smuggle Zionism into the madrasa through the backdoor and thereby poison the minds of the students' (http://www.islaminterfaith.org/august2003/interview.html#interview2).

[17] 'Ilm-i Din Ke Sath Ma'ddi 'Ulum Bhi Zaruri', *Qaumi Awaz*, 11 April, 1995.

[18] See, for instance, the several papers of 'ulama advocates of madrasa reform in *'Arabi Islami Madaris Ka Nisab-o-Nizam-i Ta'lim Aur 'Asri Taqaze*, Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1995.

[19] Ehtashamuddin Khan, 'Madrasas Want to Moderrnise, But Not Too Much', *The Fragrance of the East*, vol.v, no.1, January-March, 2003, p.59.

[20] 'Modernising Madrasas', *The Times of India*, Bangalore, 8 July, 2002.

[21] Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform', 'Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol.41, no.2, April 1999, p.295.

[22] Sultan Ahmad Islahi, *Hindustan Mai Madaris-i-'Arabiya Ke Masa'il*, Aligarh: Idara-i 'Ilm-o-Adab, n.d., p. 152.

[23] Aslam Parwez, 'Madaris Ke Nisab Aur Science', in '*Arabi Islami Madaris Ka Nisab-o-Nizam-i Ta'lim*, Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1995, op.cit., p.125.

[24] Aftab Ahmad, 'Madaris-i 'Arabiya Ka Nisab Aur Waqt Ki Zarurat', in '*Arabi Islami Madaris Ka Nisab-o-Nizam-i Ta'lim*, op.cit., p. 143.

[25] Mufti Ahmad Yahya Devlavi, 'Madaris Mai 'Asri Ta'lim', *Da'wat*, 25 July, 2003.

[26] Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, Herndon, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989.

[27] Sayyed Abul Hasan 'Ali Nadwi, *'Ilm Ka Muqam Aur Ahl-i 'Ilm Ki Zimmedariyan*, Majlis Tahqiqat-o-Nashriyat ul-Islam, Lucknow, 1997, pp.7.

[28] Ghulam Yahya Anjum, *Anwar-i Khyal*, New Delhi, 1991, pp.123-30.

[29] For a detailed discussion of the Islamization of knowledge project, see Leif Stenberg, *The Islamization of Science: Four Muslim Positions Developing an Islamic Modernity*, Lund: Lund University, 1996.

[30] Khurshid Ahmad, *Nizam-i Ta'lim: Nazariya, Rivayat, Masa'il*, Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1996, p.235.

[31] Mumshad 'Ali Qasmi, op.cit., pp.154-55.

[32] Mujahid ul-Islam Qasmi (ed.) Maqalat-i Sajjad, Patna: Imarat-i Shari'ah, 1999, p.72.

[33] Muhammad Shahabuddin Nadwi, *Hamare Ta'limi Masa'il*, Bangalore: Furqania Academy, 1989, pp.19-20.

[34] Sayyed Manazir Ahsan Gilani, *Hindustan Mai Musalmano Ka Nizam-i Ta'lim-o-Tarbiyat* (vol.1), Delhi: Nadwat ul-Musannifin, 1987, p.303.

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[35] Muhammad Taqi Usmani, *Fazilat-i 'Ilm-o-'Ulama*, Delhi: Farid Book Depot, 1999, pp.22-27.

[36] Muhammad Wali Rahmani, *Dini Madaris Mai Sanati Ta'lim Ka Masla*, Munger: Jami'a Rahmani, 1981, p.9.

[37] Ibid., p.22.

[38] Muhammad Nejatullah Siddiqui, *Dini Madaris: Masa'il Aur Taqaze*, New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba-i Islami, 2001, p.11.

[39] Muhammad Wali Rahmani, *Dini Madaris Mai Sanati Ta'lim Ka Masla*, Munger: Jami'a Rahmani, 1981, pp.17-19.

[40] Sayyed Muhammad Rabe Hasni Nadwi, *Musalman Aur Ta'lim*, Lucknow: Nadwat ul-'Ulama, 1997, p.53.

[41] Habib ur-Rahman 'Azmi 'Umri, 'Dini Madaris Ki Zimmedariyan Aur Biradiran-i Watan', in *Dini Madaris Aur Unkey Masa'il*, Baleriaganj: Jami'at ul-Falah, 1990, p. 134.

[42] Shihabuddin Nadwi, op.cit., p. 15.

[43] Mohsin Usmani Nadwi, 'Madaris Ka Nizam-i-Ta'lim Aur Naya Challenge', *Islam Aur 'Asr-i Jadid*, vol.32, no.4, October, 2000, pp.107-08.

[44] Muhammad Muhsin, 'Dini Madaris Ka Nisab', in '*Arabi Islami Madaris Ke Nisab-o-Nizam-i-Ta'lim*, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna, 1995, p.102.

[45] Mumshad 'Ali Qasmi, op.cit., p.70.

[46] Maqbul Ahmad Misbahi, 'Hindustan Aur 'Alam-i Arab ke Nisab-i Ta'lim Ka Taqabli Ja'iza, *Islam Aur 'Asr-I Jadid*, vol.32, no.4, October 2000, p.83.

[47] Abul 'Irfan Nadwi, 'Nisab-i Ta'lim Aur Tariqa-i Ta'lim: Maujuda Ahad Ke Taqaze', *Islam Aur 'Asr-i Jadid*, vol.12, no.4, October 1980, p.36.

[48] Muhammad Rizwan ul-Qasmi, *Maqalat-i Sajjad*, Patna: Imarat-i Shari'ah, 1999, p.29.

[49] Fazlur Rahman Faridi, 'Dini Madaris Ka Nisab-i Ta'lim Aur 'Asri Challenge', in *Kul Hind Dini Madaris Convention Souvenir*, New Delhi: All-India Milli Council, n.d., p.86.

[50] Quoted in Moinuddin Ahmed, *The Urgency of Ijtihad*, New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1992., p.92.

[51] Quoted in Moinuddin Ahmed, ibid., p.93.

[52] Mufti Zahiruddin Miftahi, 'Madaris-i Diniya Aur Unke Masa'il', in *Dini Madaris Aur Unkey Masa'il*, Bilariyaganj: Jami'at ul-Falah, 1990, pp.55-57. The Mufti writes that the Barelwis (whom he derisively refers to as 'Raza Khanis') dismiss all other Muslim groups as non-Muslim, and so cannot be expected to join the madrasa board.

[53] Muhammad Shams Tabrez, ' 'Ilm-o-Taqwa Ki Buniyad Par Ta'lim-o-Tarbiyat', *Naqib*, Phulwari Sharif, 10-17 June, 1996, p.1.

[54] Mumshad 'Ali Qasmi, op.cit., p.82.

[55] Mumshad 'Ali Qasmi, op.cit., p.82.

[56] Qamruddin, *Hindustan Ki Dini Darsgahe: Kul Hind Survey*, New Delhi: Hamdard Educational Society, 1996, p.53.

[57] Washim Ahmad, 'Psychology of Education: Madrasas of UP', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25-31 March, 2000 [http://www.epw.org.in/35-13/comm5.htm].

[58] The Centre for Promotion of Science functions under the Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. One of its principal aims is to promote the teaching of science in madrasas, for which it organizes workshops for designing appropriate teaching material as well as regular condensed courses on science for madrasa graduates. For details, see http://www.angelfire.com/sc3/cps

[59] Some madrasas have tried to introduce teachers' training courses but do not seem to have succeeded. The chief Barelwi madrasa in India, the Jami'a Ashraiya, Mubarakpur, claims to have a two-year course, under which at present a mere 4 students are said to be undergoing training.

[60] Shahabuddin Nadwi, op.cit., p.20.

[61] 'Prof. Joshi Has Designs on Madrasas', *The Milli Gazette*, 1-15 February, 2000.

[62] Nizam Elahi, *Modernisation of Madrasa Education Scheme in India*, New Delhi: State Council for Educational Research and Training, 2001, pp.12-13.

[63] Syed Shahabuddin, quoted in Madhav Godbole, '*Madrasas*: Need for a Fresh Look', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 October 2001, p.3890.

[64] Nizam Elahi, *Modernisation of Madrasa Education Scheme in India*, New Delhi: State Council for Educational Research and Training, 2001, p.21.

[65] Comments of several 'ulama interviewed in the course of fieldwork.

[66] According to a 1998 report, the figures for the number of madrasas affiliated to selected state boards of madrasa education were as follows: Bihar (1600), Uttar Pradesh (375), Orissa (79) (Quoted in Mohammad Akhtar Siddiqui, 'Development and Trends in Madrasa Education', in A.W.B.Qadri, Riaz Shakir Khan and Mohammed Akhter Siddique, *Education and Muslims in India Since Independence*, New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1998, p.78. In mid-2002, 507 madrasas in West Bengal were recognized by the state madrasa education board (*The Hindu*, 18 June, 2002).

[67] Thus, for instance, the scheme is said to have almost completely 'flopped' in Maharashtra (with only six madrasas joining the project). Amin Khandwani, chairman of the Maharashtra Minorities Commission, alleged that one of the main reasons for this was that the state government had sorely neglected' the scheme (Shabnam Minwalla, 'Madrasas Need to Move With the Times', *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 3 December, 2001).

[68] Interview with Zafrul Islam Khan , editor, *The Milli Gazette*, New Delhi, 2 January, 2003.

[69] Irshadul Haque, 'Bureaucrats Foil Madrasah Education Modernisation Programme', *The Milli Gazette*, 1-15 October, 2002, p.23.

[70] 'Educational Awareness Among Muslims: A Positive Step' (http://www.milligazette.com/Archives/15042001/Art11.htm).

[71] 'Madrasa Modernisation in Rajasthan'*, Islamic Voice*, June, 2001.

[72] 'Winds of Change Sweep Rajasthan Madrasas', *Islamic Voice*, May, 1997.

[73] Khalid Saifullah Rahmani,, 'Nisab-i Ta'lim: Ek Ja'iza', in *Kul Hind Dini Madaris Convention Souvenir*, New Delhi: All-India Muslim Milli Council, 1994, p.76.

[74] Mufti Muhammad Sulaiman Mansurpuri, 'Sarkari Imdad Dini Madaris Ke Liye Sitam Qatil', *Tarjuman-i Dar ul-'Ulum*, August, 2003, pp.19-22.