

Madarsa System of Education in Pakistan: Challenges and Issues

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Abstract

Madrasa system of education faces many challenges and issues all over the world. Having glorious past, Madrasas are now considered as promoting terrorism and extremism. In Pakistan, where religious institutions are found in large quantity, these institutions are made responsible for giving training to terrorists and fundamentalists. The western media and countries consider these institutions as the jihad factories. Whatever the challenges and issues, these institutions face today, were cultivated in 1980s decay during Afghan-Soviet war. Many Madrasas were pushed into the war due to external pressure. The element of violence entered into some of the Madrasas in Pakistan following jihadi ideology during that era. The Madrasas were given lot of funds by USA for the war training and sending students to Afghanistan to take part in the war. Soon after the war was over, USA stopped providing funds to these institutions. As a result these institutions started facing issues and challenges. They tried to consume raw material in the shape of war trained students in the global market. Many international agencies started hiring these institutions for their own benefit. Because of these few extremist organizations, the whole Madrasa system of education is blamed. Besides, Madrasa system of education does not adapt change. The curriculum, syllabus and teaching techniques are very old and inflexible. The formulation and update of aims, goal, objectives, vision and mission has not been given due importance in this system. The connections of Madrasas with Afghan Taliban and ideological differences among them have given rise to financial crisis. There is a communication gap and lack of trust between Government representatives and Madrasa organizers. Though government has made the registration mandatory, yet a vast majority of the Madrasas is still unregistered.

Introduction

In Pakistan, Madrassas are working as Islamic Seminaries. They are imparting Islamic education at graduation level. They were raised to learning colleges in the world of Islam in eleventh century. Before that Islamic and secular subjects were taught equally in those institutions. Moulton (2008) confirms that “Madrassas are at least a thousand years old” (p. 2). The standardized curriculum called Darse-i-Nizamia was introduced in Madrasa system of education in eighteenth century. In this curriculum rational science subjects were taught along with religious subjects. The history witnesses that there are many teachers, judges, physicians and administrators that have Madrasa background of education (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>).

The word Madrasa is derived from Arabic language, which means a building where Islamic teaching learning takes place at graduation level (American Heritage Dictionary of English language, 2005). Historically, Madrasas are the Islamic learning institutions that produce religious leaders and scholars. They provide not only free education to all students but boarding and lodging is also free there (Ahmed, 2009, p. 2). Asia report (2013) identifies that “as an alternate track to Western style of education, religious seminaries Madrasas and religious education have played a vital role in the history of Islam to fulfill the education needs of Islamic society” (p. 4). At present, they are globally known as the center of Islamic learning. They have their own curriculum and teaching methods. They do not follow the curriculum designed at government level in Pakistan (Andrabi, Das, Khwaja & Zajonc, 2005, p. 10). Bano (2007) asserts that Madrasas are philanthropic autonomous bodies, running on the funds of well-wishers, philanthropists and NGOs. They have their own curriculum. They provide free education along with free boarding and food. Asia report (2013) confirms that “notwithstanding their notoriety in the West, Madrasas in Pakistan are considered as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that provide free education, boarding, and lodging to their students, and help to ‘educate’ the poverty struck in society” (p. 4). They are working parallel to government and private educational organizations. National education policy (2009) points out that three separate education systems i.e. public system of education, private system of education and Madrasa system of education with

separate curriculum have created a number of problems for students. Das, Pandey and Zajonc (2006) add that there are many learning gaps existing among public sector, private sector and Madrasa sector students.

After independence in 1947, the rapid growth of Madrasas has been observed. There were only one hundred eighty nine Madrasas at the time of independence in 1947. The number increased to 13,000 in 2002 and 40,000 in 2008 (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>). Bukhari and Rehman (2006) believe that rapid growth of Madrasas was the result of demand by the common people. When state not only failed to provide education to all masses but also did not come up with alternatives, the demand of Madrasas grew rapidly. Considering the positive social and educational role, not only masses but the state also supported the Madrasa system of education.

Pakistani Madrasas system of education is governed by five bodies or schools of thought. These include Barelwi school of thought, Deobandi school of thought, Shia school of thought, Ahle Hadith school of thought and Jamaat-e-Islami school of thought (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>). Every school of thought has its own curriculum and education policy. Ahmed (2009) confirms that five different types of Madrasas are working in Pakistan with varying ideologies. They are divided into different categories on political or sectarian basis (p.2). Rehman (2004) adds that Madrasa education system is organized by five distinct boards having dissimilar ideologies.

However, at present Madrasa system of education is facing many internal and external challenges and issues. Internal challenges and issues are due to controversial and opponent ideologies adapted by different schools of thought, while external challenges are due to changing western interests in the region.

Role of Madrasas

Madrasas have ever played multiple positive roles in our society. Jamal (1996) describes four aspects of the role of Madrasas including promotion of educational services, training of clerks, Islamic awareness and social services. Zaidi (2009) quoting statistical figures of Pakistani education states that there are seventy million children between age 5-19 and only 40% of them are enrolled in schools and

Das, Pandey and Zajonc (2006) add that Madrasas are the best choice for such a great number of children. Mazari (2009) recognizes that Madrasas are the best choice for the poorest. Nayyar (1998) connects that the students who cannot afford private schools, for them Madrasa education is the first choice because free education with lodging and boarding can never be found anywhere other than Madrasas. Ahmed (2004) states that majority of poor students receive their education in Madrasas. However, contrary to Ahmed (2004), Andrabi, Das and Khawaja (2008) believe that compared with government schools, the rich students are more in Madrasas than government schools. Bano (2007) believes that philanthropists, parents and students are emotionally attached to these religious institutions and the teachers.

Even today, when Madrasas are highly criticized on account of their involvement in politics, their social and educational roles are still appreciated all over the world. Asia report (2013) identifies that “in these circumstances, even if Madrasas are criticized by a segment of society, many amongst the masses continue to support them” (P. 4). All the parents, students and philanthropists believe that social and educational services of Madrasas are unique and incomparable. They have brought many changes in the society. They are providing free education, food and shelter to a great number of poor children. They are promoting religious awareness and social welfare in every part of the country. The history witnesses that they have made remarkable contribution in the field of science, culture, tradition, history, literature and medicine. They have produced many scholars and intellectuals that are always alive in the books of history due to their noble services. Because of great contribution, the Madrasas are being fully funded by philanthropists from time to time. The state of Pakistan has also appreciated and supported the role of Madrasas from time to time.

Now the question raises that why these religious institution were funded and supported by state and philanthropists all over the world, if they were terrorists. The history also reveals that even USA and western countries have given lot of funds to these charitable institutions. There was a great flow of funds from USA for these religious institutions during 1980s decay. In that situation one is righteous to ask, all of sudden what happened to these institutions that

they have turned to be terrorists. They were connected to terrorism and extremism in a night.

Before eleven September 2001, the words like terrorism, radicalism and fundamentalism were not used for these religious institutions. Even today, all Madrasa are not connected with violence or extremism. Bergen and Pandey (2006) through research proved that there were only a few Madrasa students among seventy nine terrorists that were involved in worst anti-Western terrorist attacks. Moulton (2008) advocates that Pakistani Madrasa education system, after eleven September, has been highly criticized by western media and countries on account of political reasons. They have deliberately depicted negative picture of these religious institutions (p. 1). Haqqani (2002) confirms that they have connected these religious institutions with terrorism, radicalism and fundamentalism for the sake of their own interest. Riaz (2005) adds that to western countries, Pakistani Madrasa education system supports militancy and terrorism, giving it the name of jihad.

Critics on Madrasas

Madrasa system of education is facing severe criticism after terrorist attack on USA. The negative role of Madrasas have been discussed and highlighted in many newspapers, articles, research papers, magazines and talk shows on electronic media. They are connected with violence and promotion of extremism. International Crisis Group (2002) in one of the report regarding Madrasas states that Pakistani Madrasas promote extremism and terrorism. The State of sectarianism in Pakistan (2005) describes that violence entered into Madrasas in 1980s during Zia regime when Madrasas were funded to train the jihadi for Afghan-Soviet war. Rana (2003) has given a lengthy list of Pakistani Madrasas that are connected with jihadi organizations. Ali (2005) confirms that there are three hundred sixty three Madrasas in Ahmadpur (Punjab) and most of them promote sectarian violence. Nine eleven commission report (2004) verifies that many Pakistani Madrasas are connected with terrorism and extremism. Billquist and Colbert (2006) made a research and found that most of the Madrasas have their own religious militancy.

Chaudhry (2005), Jalal (2008) and Hussain (2007) also highlight the allegation that curriculum of Madrasa system of education is devoid of modernity and economic growth. It does not support industrialization and trade that are essential for growth and development. Tavernise (2009) adds that in Madrasa curriculum the emphasis is given only on quran memorization. There is no space for secular subjects. Riaz (2008) affirms that Madrasa system of education generates and promotes sectarianism. Dalrymple (2005) claims that Madrasas are incapable to produce technically well educated and trained persons.

Similarly Magnier (2009), Fair (2007) and Hussain (2007) have also made criticism on their indulgence in sectarian and political activities. To them, Madrasa should focus only on educational and social activities.

Issues and challenges of Madrasa system of education

Madrasa system of education is working in Pakistan along with private and public education system. When there are many problems in public and private sectors, so how can one expect that religious sector of education will be without problems. In fact there are many problems but the question raises what is the nature of problems. Are these problems due to Madrasa education system's deficient traditional set up and inherent disorders or due to global issues?

Madrasa system of education, having long and rich history, is currently facing many issues and challenges. The issues are global in nature and need to be addressed and solved, while the challenges refer the difficult and demanding situation.

Since nine September 2001, USA directly or indirectly has targeted the Madrasa system of education in Pakistan, in the name of war against terrorism. USA and western media have used the words extremism and fundamentalism repeatedly for Madrasas in such a way that where-ever one hears these words, the name of Madrasas automatically come in one's mind.

The western media and countries consider these institutions as the jihad factories. It has become very difficult for Madrasa organizers to defend this global allegation. More over, internal conflicts and

financial crisis of Madrasas have also created many challenges in their way to achieve the social and educational aims.

The questions might arise in the mind of intellectuals that why USA and western media is against Madrasas. Are they really promoting terrorism? Madrasas are preserving Muslim culture and tradition, is it a problem for USA and western media? Are they against Muslim culture and tradition? Do they want to destroy Muslim culture and tradition? There are many such questions that demand satisfactory answer.

Many possibilities have been widely discussed and accepted by the intellectuals all over the world that USA and western media might want promote western culture and tradition and Madrasas are the only obstacle in their way to promote their culture and tradition in Muslim countries. Edwards, Hulme and Wallace (1999) point out that Madrasas are targeted because of controversial cultural globalization process. They further state that west want promote western norms in modern world to set up a global market for their goods and services. Keddie (2003) adds that western countries and media often think Islamic culture and tradition as a great obstacle in the way of economic growth and development. West believes that political, social and economical progress is impossible in globalization in the presence of such obstacle. This might be one of the reasons that west is targeting Madrasa system of education to root out the culture and tradition of Muslims that create problems in their way to rule the world.

However, Watt (1961) narrates that in the beginning west tried to promote secular intellectual development in Muslim countries but Madrasa organizers rejected to introduce such education system in Madrasas. Nelson (2008) adds that Madrasas are running on the funds of philanthropists that provide funds for Islamic education to be provided in Madrasas. More over the majority of people in Pakistan wants to have religious education in Madrasas. They consider that secular education as an unnatural privatization of religion, which is absolutely not acceptable in Islamic society. Because of this USA and west has made the Madrasa system of education controversial.

Roy (2004) made a research on globalized Islam and found that neither Islam is any threat to world nor Madrasas promote any kind of terrorism. Rather Islam is peace loving religion and Madrasas lead to

peace and prosperity. It is only a misfortune of Muslims that USA made the use of these pure social and educational institutions in 1980s when through government they forcibly were pushed into Afghan-Soviet war. Since then, the role of these institutions has been critically discussed. This was perhaps the first time that some Madrasas gave training to militant and sent them to Afghanistan to take part in the war. Soon after the war was over and USA stopped providing funds to these few Madrasas. As result the downfall of Madrasas started. In order to generate funds and ensure their survival, they started taking part in anti state activities. Because of these few Madrasas playing negative role, the wide network of Madrasa education system is facing sever criticism on global level. The most important issues and challenges of Madrasa system of education are as under:

1. *Adapting change*

Change is inevitable. Every thing changes with the passage of time. Change is essential for growth and development. The organizations that adapt change flourish rapidly. Similarly those which neglect change find it very difficult to survive. Change brings challenges and challenges lead to success. The Madrasa system of education does not appreciate change. The process of change is passive and very slow in Madrasa system of education.

2. *Linkage with Afghan Taliban*

Many Madrasas took active part in Afghan – Soviet war under the influence of USA. In 1989 Soviet left Afghanistan giving birth to a civil war. In 1994 Talban emerged as a leading force and in 1996 they established their government. Many of them were trained in Pakistani Madrasas. So there was a close relationship between Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Madrasa organizers. After nine eleven incident, this linkage between Pakistani Madrasas and Taliban has given rise to many challenges and issues. Nine eleven disaster report (2004) blamed Pakistani Madrasas for that incident.

3. *Registration of Madrasas*

Government established Madrasa education board in 2001 and made it compulsory for the Madrasas to get registered with these boards but Madrasa organizers showed no interest. The government passed another ordinance (Deni Madaris regulating and controlling ordinance 2002) in order to get the Madrasa system of education merged with modern education but result was still unsatisfactory. The organizers of different Madrasas formed a federation to resist government ordinance.

4. *Curriculum and teaching techniques*

The world has become a global village. The advancement of science and technology have revolutionized world. It has saved time, money and energy and brought the people and nations in close contact. In such a changing world, where modern education is being taught in both private and public schools, the Madrasa system of education still follows old curriculum and teaching methods.

5. *Formulation of aims and objectives*

Every organization has certain aims, goal and objectives. No organization can progress without a vision and mission. It has been observed that aims, goal and objectives of Madrasa system of education have not been properly determined. The education in most of the religious institutions is given without formulating aims, goals and objectives. Many Madrasa organizers are even unable to differentiate these terms. The running of Madrasa system of education without determining objectives, vision and mission creates confusion for teachers, students and administrators to get the fruitful results.

6. *Modification of contents and syllabus*

In most of the public and private schools, the contents and syllabus need modification from time to time. Considering the global challenges and advancement of science and technology, the innovation and modification in educational institutions is inevitable. The most of the organizations make the contents

and syllabus innovative and according to modern requirements. While the contents and syllabus of Madrasa system of education has remained unchanged since very long.

7. *Financial crisis*

Madrasas provide not only free education but also boarding lodging facilities. In order to meet financial matters they need funds and donation. Generating funds was not difficult for Madrasa organizers before nine eleven incident. Many philanthropists and well wishers all over the world used to make donations but at present when USA, western countries and media heavily criticize on this sector, raising funds has become an issue and challenge for these organizations.

8. *Ideological differences among Madrasas*

Ideologically Madrasas are divided into five different schools of thought representing different sects. Every school of thought considers itself right and all the remaining wrong. These ideological differences have created many gaps and consequently weakened Madrasa system of education. Until and unless, all the schools of thought do not unite, they will not be able to defend the western criticism.

To sum up Madrasa system of education is currently facing many challenges and issues due to half-heartedly attention on the part of government and changing western interest. Throughout the history of Pakistan, it has been observed that Government has either ignored or made the misuse of Madrasa system of education for the interest of external actors. In past, Madrasas were used to train the students for war against Russia. The provision of funds by USA was perhaps the beginning of downfall of Madrasa system of education in Pakistan. Pakistani Madrasas were directly or indirectly connected to Afghan Taliban and the violence entered in these educational and social organizations. This was the main reasons that USA targeted Madrasa system of education for nine eleven incident. The harsh criticism on the part of western media against Madrasas has given rise to many issues and challenges. The organizations that provided free education,

boarding and lodging started facing financial crisis. The western Media propaganda has negatively affected the local and international donors and supporters.

Similarly, the organizers of Madrasa system of education belonging to different schools of thought always made undue opposition and criticism on the rest schools of thought. This opposition has promoted sectarian differences among different schools of thought. Besides, this system of education ignores change, which is only source of growth and development. The curriculum and syllabus has remained unchanged since long. The innovation and modification that is often observed in private and public schools is missing in these religious institutions. There is a communication gap between government representatives and organizers of Madrasa system. They do not trust each other. The government has passed two ordinances in which registration of Madrasas is mandatory. But the existence of unregistered Madrasas shows the gaps.

Conclusion

Madrasa system of education is facing lot of internal and external challenges and issues. It is highly criticized on international level due to its involvement in politics and connections with Afghanistan government and Taliban. It is loosing its glorious past. In past it was highly appreciated, respected and funded for its noble social and educational services. Currently, the education system of Madrasas is facing financial crisis. The communication gaps between Madrasa organizers and government, their internal ideological differences, avoiding adapting change, old and traditional curriculum, syllabus and teaching methods, system without setting proper aims, goals, objectives and vision have given rise to many challenges and issues for this system.

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