

Madrasas and Terrorism

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Subjected to relentless attack by right-wing Hindu groups and by influential sections of the media as alleged 'dens of terror', madrasas in India are now often talked about within a narrow framework that is defined essentially by security considerations. Forced on the defensive, the response of the ulama, Islamic clerics who run the madrasas, is also now largely framed in similar terms, seeking to argue that madrasas have nothing to do with terrorism. Consequently, other crucial issues pertinent to the madrasas, particularly the question of curricular reform and the welfare of madrasa students, are increasingly being sidelined in public discourse about madrasas in India, and probably elsewhere too.

In response to media allegations against madrasas, Indian ulama organisations have, in recent years, organised several conferences and seminars seeking to put forward their argument that madrasas have nothing to do with terrorism at all. One such conference, titled *The Humanistic Role of Islamic Madrasas*, was recently held in New Delhi, it was organised by a faction of the Ahl-i Hadith movement, a school of Islamic thought ideologically close to, if not almost identical with, the Saudi Wahhabis. In contrast to most other such conferences, this one brought together leading ulama of schools of thought other than the Ahl-i Hadith as well, such as the Deobandis and the Jamaat-i Islami. Not surprisingly, the Sunni Barelvis and the shias, both of who consider the Ahl-i Hadith Wahhabis to be virtually outside the pale of Islam, were conspicuous by their absence.

Allegations of terrorism leveled against the madrasas were a major issue of discussion during the two-day conference. The subject was the central focus of the keynote address by Maulvi Rabe Hasani Nadvi, rector of the Nadwat ul-ulama madrasa, Lucknow, and President of the influential All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, considered to be one of the leading ulama of India. Although Nadvi did not attend the conference, copies of his speech were distributed to the participants.

Nadvi's comments reflect a widespread response on the part of the ulama to the charges leveled against the madrasas by their detractors as well as to critiques of madrasas by fellow Muslim advocates of madrasa reform. Nadvi insists that, far from being producing 'terrorists', madrasas are devoted to training students who, in his words, 'possess high morals', 'nobility' and 'humaneness'. Critics of the madrasas, he argues, are motivated by base motives. They have inherited, he says, the legacy of European colonial rulers, who, for their own benefit, introduced a system of education that had no space for morality and spirituality, and that was focused, instead, solely on material acquisitiveness. This system of education was not concerned with the life after death but, rather, was centred entirely on worldly pleasures.

Consequently, he argues, European colonialists sought to destroy the madrasas, and their ideological progeny today continue in their legacy. In thus seeking to defend the madrasas from allegations made against them, Nadvi offers a mirror image of the arguments of detractors of the madrasas, seeing madrasas as representing the ideal system of education in no need of any substantial change. On the other hand, he dismisses the 'modern', 'secular' system of education as a left-over from colonial times,

critiquing it for, as he puts it, 'ignoring the higher goals of a moral life and being, in one sense, opposed to these', being allegedly wholly worldly.

Nadvi thus sees no merit at all in the arguments of the critics of the madrasas. Their intentions, he suggests, are ignoble and their arguments reflect the fact that they are products of a colonial education that sees religion and the 'high humane values' that he says madrasas stand for as a stumbling-block in the path of establishing their own hegemony. This is why, he says, imperialist forces are seeking to defame madrasas as 'conservative', 'fundamentalist' and as ideological factories of 'terrorism'. In this determined defence of madrasas, the difference between theory or rhetoric and actual practice is completely erased. It is as if the graduates of madrasas, unlike their counterparts from 'modern' schools, are the very epitome of virtue. As Nadvi puts it, 'The role of other forms of education in promoting people's morals and character appears much less than that of the madrasas'. The critique of madrasas articulated by their opponents is thus dismissed as having not the slightest validity at all.

In Nadvi's determined defence of the madrasas there is no recognition of the obvious fact that not all madrasa students live up to the high moral standards he insists that madrasas maintain. There is no admission of the fact that sectarian prejudice is actively cultivated in many madrasas, a fact much lamented by Muslim modernists, with almost every madrasa being associated with one or the other of several competing schools of Islamic thought, one of their main functions being to rebut the claims of their competitors to representing normative Islam. Nor is there any reference to the fact of patriarchal attitudes and what Islamist feminists would argue are misogynist and 'un-Islamic' interpretations of the shariah that are routinely articulated in the speeches and writings of numerous ulama associated with the madrasas. What Muslim advocates of interfaith dialogue would contend are the 'un-Islamic' positions on inter-faith relations and perceptions of other faiths and their adherents that are associated with some significant sections of the ulama are also completely invisibilised in this *uncritical praise* of the madrasas. There is not even a hint of recognition of the fact, as claimed even by several sympathetic Muslim advocates of madrasa reform, that madrasas often promote a narrow, insular mindset. That madrasas generally focus on the nitty-gritty of medieval fiqh or jurisprudence on a host of issues that have completely lost their relevance or else are interpreted in such a manner as to be incompatible with modern sensitivities, thus failing to equip their students to creatively engage with contemporary challenges and demands, is also ignored. In Nadvi's uncritical adulation of madrasas there is no allusion to fact that at least some madrasas in neighbouring Pakistan are engaged in promoting militancy and sectarian strife, a fact that detractors of the madrasas have used to wrongly brand Indian madrasas as 'dens of terror'. It is thus as if there is no need for madrasas to introspect, to recognise the fact that there might be at least a hint of merit in some of the arguments put forward by some of their detractors.

Nadvi, however, is probably right when he argues that Indian madrasas are not engaged in actively promoting 'terrorism'. This is something that even some senior government officials have testified to. In contrast to madrasas in India, literally thousands of schools run by right-wing Hindu organisations instill in their students relentless hatred of Muslims, Christians and other non-Hindu communities. Yet, like the hardcore, right-wing Hindu detractors of the madrasas, Nadvi's defence of the madrasa system reinforces the tendency to frame public discourse about madrasas solely in terms of their possible or alleged security implications. Consequently, other crucial issues related to the madrasas, particularly the question of curricular reform, so necessary for

providing madrasa students better worldly prospects and for enabling them to interpret Islam in a more relevant manner, are increasingly sidelined. With security considerations shaping the way in which the debate on madrasas is sought to be conducted both by the traditionalist ulama as well as anti-Muslim ideologues, the welfare of millions of children studying in madrasas is increasingly being regarded as of little or no concern. Neither the traditionalist ulama, with a vested interest in preserving madrasas largely as they are, nor hardcore islamophobes, vociferously opposed to the existence of the madrasas, thus appear particularly interested in going beyond the narrow confines of a security-driven discourse to put the welfare of madrasa students at the centre of the madrasa debate. *~~~~~*