

A Madrasa with a Difference

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Contrary to how the media generally portrays them, madrasas in India are not entirely opposed to reform. Indeed, the winds of change are being felt even in the portals of the more conservative madrasas, such as the vast network of Deobandi seminaries spread across the country. One such instance is the recently-established *Jamia ul-Umoor*, in New Delhi's Muslim-dominated Abul Fazl locality.

Set up in 2005, the *Jamia ul-Umoor* is the brainchild of two young graduates of the Dar ul-Ulum, Deoband, India's largest and most influential madrasa. Maulanas Khalid Saifullah Qasmi and Azmatullah Qasmi, the men behind this venture, are both in their mid-twenties and represent a new generation of Deobandi scholars eager to embrace and promote modern knowledge along with traditional Islamic learning. After having received their degree from Deoband they enrolled at the Dar ul-Umoor, in Srirangapatnam, near Mysore, for a year's course in a range of 'modern' disciplines.

Like their teachers, the twenty-odd students at *Jamia ul-Umoor* are all graduates of the Deoband madrasa. Having completed a rigorous eight-year course in Islamic Studies there, in the *Jamia* they are now being exposed to a whole new world of learning. The two-year course that they are undergoing consists of lessons in English, Computers, Economics, History, Geography, Mathematics, Management, Political Science, Physical Sciences, Journalism and Comparative Religions—all subjects that they have had little or no exposure to in their years at Deoband. Judging by the ease with which the students converse in English, despite having studied it for less than half a year, they seem to be fast and eager learners and their five teachers, zealous instructors.

The students, neatly dressed in spotless kurta-pajamas and topis, sit in a circle on a large quilt. On being prompted by his teachers, Tauqir Qasmi, who has just turned twenty, stands up and delivers an impassioned speech in Arabic on the importance of modern education and on how Islam positively encourages it. His colleague, Aslam Rafiqi Qasmi, follows after him, with a remarkably clear speech in English on the problems of the Indian Muslims. He refers to the 'shameful and lamentable' Partition of India and the 'massive and most horrendous' killings of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs that ensued. The Indian Muslims, he says, 'continue to pay a heavy price for the Partition', being 'wrongly branded' as anti-nationals by many Hindus'. He refers to the literally thousands of Muslims who have lost their lives in hundreds of organized pogroms and riots in India since 1947, and of the discrimination that they continue to face in many spheres. He ends his speech by stressing the need for Muslims to take to both religious as well as modern education.

The students and their teachers of this institution insist that the Deobandi elders are not against modern education per se, as is commonly imagined. Hasan, a young student from Bihar, argues, 'Islam says that all beneficial knowledge can be acquired and so our ulema have never opposed what is good in the modern educational system. What they were opposed to, however, was Western culture.'

We can and, indeed, should acquire knowledge of all the beneficial modern disciplines, provided this is done according to our culture and that it helps us become better Muslims'. Ali, another student, adds, 'In Islam, there is no distinction between religious and secular education. All forms of beneficial knowledge should be had'. Says another student, Abdur Rahman, 'Learning English, Computer Applications and other modern subjects will help us in our task to telling others about Islam'.

Maulana Furqan, senior teacher, nods his head in agreement. He tells this correspondent that three graduates of Jamia ul-Umoor's first batch, which passed out last year, are now studying at a regular university, the Jamia Millia Islamia, in New Delhi. 'We want our graduates to go on to join universities and then take up a range of careers, not necessarily as maulvis or religious specialists', he says. 'In the past, madrasas produced both ulema as well architects, astronomers, scientists and so on', he informs me, 'and so we must go back to that holistic conception of education and bridge the gulf between the ulema and those who have studied in universities'. 'Working in various fields, and not just as maulvis, our students can play an important role in promoting social reforms as well as communicating the message of Islam to others', he adds. 'In today's world, you need to know English in order to tell others about Islam. Also, there is a wealth of useful knowledge in English', he explains. 'Hence', he stresses, 'it is important that maulvis, too, must learn the language'.

Innovative madrasas like the *Jamia ul-Umoor* are increasingly visible today, although the media rarely, if ever, refers to them. These institutions indicate the possibility of bridging the rigid dualism that characterizes Muslim education, between the ulema and those who have studied in 'modern' institutions, something crucial for promoting education among Muslims more generally. □□