An account of the madrasahs in India takes us into the history of the institution spread over the period of the medieval, the colonial context, and, more importantly, the post 1947 scenario when India gained independence from the British rule. This chapter also examines the events that provide a backdrop to the studies in social sciences focused on India. Each historical period is outlined in terms of how the religious institutions have dealt with the state and the community of beneficiaries.

There is a recent upsurge of popular interest in the madrasahs and the ulamā. The invocation of madrasahs and the class of clerics associated with the institution have been stereotyped to provide easy answers to some perplexing questions that beset the modern world. The tendency to see madrasahs conforming to the state’s blueprint of reforming the institution and its scholarly tradition has in general ignored developmental trajectories of madrasahs in its own terms and also how it relates to the society of its constituency.

The modern state’s relation with the madrasahs is about both policy and administrative control required to keep the institution within the fold of educational mainstream. The responses of madrasahs are examined in terms of the stated norms as well as their practice and their bearing on the intended outcomes. The madrasahs have either brought about some blending of the modern and traditional curricular components or have inducted the traditionally neglected gender within the educational fold of Islamic learning.

The chapter also attempts to chart out the logic of the madrasah in its own terms, in terms of its context and the conditions which make the reality of a madrasah socially and culturally possible. This provides a partial reason for the
continued existence of the madrasahs in India and their salience within the Muslim communities.

**Keywords**

Madrasah • Maktab • Reform • Self-reform • Curriculum • Modernization

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**Introduction**

The reform of the madrasahs in India has followed from the directives of both the state and the madrasahs themselves. More importantly, the social and political contexts of the institutions have a bearing on acceptance or disapproval for reforming the madrasahs. The state-led initiatives in reforming madrasahs have gone alongside the self-initiated reforms of madrasahs themselves. This is not to gloss over the major chunk in the madrasah universe that has chosen to remain outside the state policy related to reforming or perhaps “mainstreaming” the madrasah curriculum. What follows is an outline of the idea of madrasah reform during the English rule in India before 1947 and the continuities in the policy of the independent India after 1947.

**Madrasah Reform in India Before 1947**

The contemporary perception of madrasahs needing urgent reform in its curriculum and pedagogy has a long history in India. The observation about the questionable utility of madrasah education is as old as the history of colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

In 1824, James Mill, the champion of the notion of “useful learning,” termed learning in an Islamic seminary to be “frivolous” (quoted in Zaman 2002: 64). In 1825 Delhi College was established under the aegis of the British India “pursuant to the report of the General Committee on Public Instruction critical of the state of the private madrasahs where Qur’an and fiqh took most of the time. In contrast, the Delhi College was supposed to connect education to finding “suitable work” (quoted in Metcalf 1982: 72). In 1838, Charles Trevelyan, a Victorian colonial administrator
and the architect of the modern British civil service, quotes the statement of the government of Bengal on the Calcutta Madrassah that it was the center of “bigotry and error” (Trevelyan 1838: 91). Around the same time, the famous Adams Report on the state of education in Bengal observes in the context of a village maktab that the general instruction given was “crude and imperfect” (Adam 1941: 330). This followed from the 1835 policy of English education under William Bentinck wherein “the Calcutta Madrassah lost its importance as a recruiting ground for the public services” (Ibrahimy 1985: 32). This established the official views on the madrasahs that they were neither producing scientific rationality nor furnishing the degrees for entry into the ranks of the middle classes.

An insider’s response to the state initiative to reform madrasahs is best articulated in the writings of an Islamic scholar Maulana Syed Manazir Ahsan Gilani (1943: 4–5). He belonged to the historical Islamic seminary, Darul Uloom Deoband, and was a keen observer of the trend of increasing influence of modern education that challenged the existing madrasahs. He observed how the Muslims of the third and the fourth generation were the main beneficiaries of the modern educational system and gradually became

distanced from Islam and its way of life. . . . These families . . . have merely a notional belonging to Islam. They are ignorant of even the most basics of Islam. . . . Educated people whom one could recognise with their Muslim names were ignorant about the life of the prophet (of Islam). . . . With the passage of time (as modern education gains ground) the number of notional Muslims in the community would also increase. . . . (ibid.: 4)

Gilani was also concerned about the spread of compulsory modern education and its consequences on Muslim families and their children. He observes how “an average Muslim with some working knowledge of Islam would soon lose their commitment. The “ulamā too would soon find their position weakened with the turning away of the modern, educated Muslims” (ibid.). To respond to the above challenges, he recommended the Muslim community “to revisit the (Islamic) philosophical tradition introspectively” (ibid.: 5).

In the light of the above comments, Manazir Ahsan Gilani proposes what he called naẓariyah waḥdat-i niẓām-i t’alīm (the perspective of the unity of the educational system). He said that the difference made between the secular and religious subjects in a madrasah may be dispensed with. Some of the non-Islamic sciences in the madrasah curriculum, in his view, needed to be revised and substituted with English and other modern disciplines. In defense of his proposal, Gilani emphasized how important it was for the madrasahs to incorporate modern disciplines within their fold. This way, the institution would be able to exercise control over the new generation through its own teachers who are devout Muslims (and not whom Gilani called Muslims “in name only”)). He hoped to see a generation of Muslims graduating from these institutions who would, in his assessment, be able to transact Islamic disciplines in a satisfactory manner. Gilani’s views echo in the emerging educational institutions in contemporary India that seek to mainstream their educational package while keeping their ties with Islamic studies.
Madrasah Reform: Post 1947

The universe of madrasahs in India embodies a diversity of schools of Islamic thought. It does not represent an organized, international institutional network. Some madrasas are related to other madrasas on a more systematic basis compared to others. Important illustrations of organized associations representing madrasahs (Nair 2009: 15) include Rabata-e Madaris-e Darul Uloom Deoband, the southern India’s Kerala’s Federation of Madrasahs and north Indian Dini Talim Council Uttar Pradesh. All except the last of these are independent of the state affiliation. Their primary objective of the associations is to protect the Islamic character of madrasahs and maintain their standards of education. The network of madrasas around Darul Uloom Deoband is spread at a national level. The body acts as a nodal point for the cluster of madrasahs, in each state enjoying relative autonomy from their dependence on the government grant.

The Kerala-based Federation of Madrasas operates through independent denominational institutions such as the Kerala Naduvathul Mujahideen (KNM) (Osella and Osella 2013: 139–170), the Jamaat-e-Islami, and the Samatha Kerala Sunni Jamaitul Ulama. None of these bodies extend their activities in the domain of politics. There are cases of individual religious scholars taking interest in the political affairs. At the national level, the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board and Jamait-e Ulama-e Hind are known more for their role in campaign and advocacy around issues relevant to the Muslim community.

A numerical account of madrasahs in India (Nair 2009: 17–18) is usually based on speculative estimates, for instance, the government of India’s Home Ministry report shows that the spread of madrasahs in various states has reached the following numbers: Uttar Pradesh (10,000), Kerala (9975), Madhya Pradesh (6000), Bihar (3500), Gujarat (1825), Rajasthan (1780), Karnataka (961), and Assam (721). Some madrasahs have got themselves registered with the individual state government’s madrasah boards, which qualifies them to receive the so-called grant-in-aid educational funding. Those outside the fold of the government’s formal recognition system are dependent on the Muslim community for the supply of funds in cash or other resources.

The post-independent state initiative regarding the regulation of religious education of Muslims focused on providing support to modernize the curriculum, ensuring that some of the disciplines in the mainstream curriculum are implemented, and, following 9/11, adding extra impetus to bring about major reform in the curriculum. In the post-independent scenario, the madrasahs have been able to claim benefits accorded to the minority status of Muslims as recognized in the constitution of India (Nair 2009: 21–23). Two fundamental rights are relevant to the Muslim community in relation to their educational matters: the Right to Freedom of Religion (Articles 25–28) and Cultural and Educational Rights (Articles 29 and 30). These rights ensure that the community has the freedom to practice and propagate their religion, manage their religious affairs, and protect their interests in relation to their minority status. This goes hand in hand with the permission to establish and administer their educational institutions. Article 28, however, adds an important caveat, “no religious
instructions shall be provided in any educational institution wholly maintained out of state grants. . . .” Clause (2) of the Article adds that “. . . nothing in Clause (1) shall apply to an educational institution that is administered by the state but has been established under any endowment or trust which requires that religious instructions shall be imparted in such institutions.” It is evident from Clause (2) that madrasahs and other minority-governed educational institutions qualify to be the beneficiary of state welfare initiatives and funding.

The central government has administered Muslim endowment properties and using the income to support educational programs for economically deserving Muslim students. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment supervises the Central Wakf Council to monitor the educational uplift of the Muslim community. The educational scheme of the council provides the scholarship to the needy students for pursuing different educational degrees. Following from the constitutional commitment to Universal Elementary Education, the government of India sponsors grant in aid focused on modernizing the madrasah curriculum through the inclusion of modern subjects and training programs for improving teaching methods.

The government-initiated madrasah modernization program (Nair 2009: 24–26) has gone through a historical trajectory. It began in 1983 with the government’s initiative through an Area-Intensive and Madrasa Modernization Program. In its revised version, the Plan of Action (1992) branched off into the development of infrastructure alongside the modernization of the curriculum. Subsequently the two were combined in the 10th 5-Year Plan. These programs, in their current description, are brought under the rubric of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Universal Elementary Education). The madrasahs exercise their choice as to whether or not to apply for government assistance. However, it requires 3 years of registration before a madrasah can apply for funds.

The modernization of the madrasah entails incorporation within the curriculum such subjects as science, math, English, Hindi, and social studies. This is to bring madrasah curriculum on a par with the mainstream subjects. The first stage of the modernization program, during the 8th 5-Year Plan period (1992–1997) covered the primary classes. The second phase (9th 5-Year Plan, 1997–2002) extended its scope to the secondary stage of schooling. The first phase covered the salaries of the qualified teachers provided to the madrasahs together with financial support to establish book banks and develop their libraries, alongside the resources required for science and math. In the 10th Plan Period, some five thousand madrasahs (less than 15% of their total number) were considered for the supply of Urdu textbooks produced by the government agencies.

The International Development Department report (hereafter, IDD report) on the state and madrasahs in India (Nair 2009) observes that three quarters of the entire funding in the modernization program was spent on the development of material infrastructure. Several factors were responsible for the partial utilization of the allocated amount, one being the inadequate circulation of information about the government’s program, as well as the reluctance of some of the madrasahs to enter into the tedious application procedure. Some of the state-independent madrasahs avoided state regulations on curricular matters.
In spite of the fact that some madrasahs choose to remain independent of government affiliation, there are certain programs that are available for unrecognized madrasas under the Universal Elementary Education (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) (ibid.: 26). These include free textbooks and a salary for a teacher for madrasahs that is specially aimed at female education. More recently the Ministry of Human Resource Development has proposed the establishment of a Central Madrasa Education Board in an attempt to ameliorate Muslim educational backwardness. According to the proposal, the state governments are urged to engage in the modernization and upgrading of madrasah education as well as putting the task of educational development in Muslim majority areas as a high priority. The purpose of the board is to coordinate and monitor the mainstreaming of madrasahs into the regular educational system. More research is required to understand why some of the unrecognized madrasahs have refrained from accessing modernization funding from the state. The qualitative profiles of such madrasahs would untangle the puzzle around the material basis of the institution and their relation with the state.

The modernization program of the madrasahs has extensively focused on the states with a substantial Muslim population, such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. This has included the establishment of state madrasah boards for the purpose of introducing modern education in madrasahs. In turn, these boards work under aegis of the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (Siddiqui 2007).

There is a scarcity of field-based research on the madrasahs that have adopted the state’s modernization program. The ethnography of the state-sponsored madrasah reform should be able to show how the design of the program is conceptualized, the instruments chosen to implement it, the nature of outcomes generated, and an assessment of how they compare with what was intended in the first place. The entire process consists of changing conditions, worldviews, and attitudes, along with fundamental transformations in personalities. Or are these mere pious intentions turned into policy statements having little bearing on effective changes in the institution?

The IDD report cites the experience of the few maktab and madrasahs in Delhi (Nair 2009: 28) which have accepted the government scheme. The report observes how most of the selected teachers, mostly women, had to travel to madrasahs in distant locations in the city. A large part of their meager remuneration (Rs. 1000, i.e., less than 25 USD) was spent on time-consuming travel. In addition, the payment of their salary was delayed. The teachers, who were supposed to be teaching native Urdu-speakers, were themselves barely able to speak Urdu. This led to the teachers dropping out of their jobs, leaving the students bereft of the intended benefits of the educational initiative.

In the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh, a well-known nongovernmental organization, the Hamdard Education Society, with a track record of surveying madrasahs in India (Qamruddin 1996) carried out another review of the madrasah modernization program in 2003. The report showed how the madrasahs who had incorporated modern subjects in the traditional curriculum did not find a slot in the official timetable. The number of teachers the state provided for the purpose was
grossly inadequate. Also, the heads of the madrasahs were barely qualified to supervise the teaching of the modern subjects; even the teachers largely lacked the required subject knowledge. The materials and equipment required to teach science, math, and English were invariably in scarce supply. The teachers’ salaries were low and paid at irregular intervals. Stemming from its survey, one major recommendation of the Hamdard Education Society to the state concerned the establishment of a Central Board for Madrasa Education with the power to monitor the implementation of the modernization program. The board was also expected to monitor the functioning of those madrasahs that received state funds. The board would thereby have ensured the standardization of curriculum across the country while in some way integrating the traditional sphere of education with the modern.

The IDD report based its survey on interviews of important actors in the madrasahs, including religious teachers and academic from well-known universities (29–33). There was a general unanimity over the principle of bringing about changes in the madrasah curriculum. Much of the disagreement concerned the authority of the government in leading such a change. Such mistrust may be understood in the wider context of communal discord as well as a highly generalized allegation that linked madrasahs with religious terrorism. The report points out how a number of scholars of Islam were critical of the state’s motive behind the modernization program. It made little sense to them that, on the one hand, the state showed interest in reforming the madrasahs and, on the other, indifference toward making available data as to Muslim backwardness. More recently some of these misgivings were validated in the government’s Sachar Committee Report (Sachar et al. 2006), which found a considerable disparity between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in respect to the percentage of the population that held regular, salaried jobs.

In the history of madrasah education, the reform has been brought about from within the institution rather than being conducted externally through the state initiative. The IDD Report quotes some religious scholars who point out that madrasahs were traditionally open to secular and modern education. In surveying the field of madrasah reforms, one would come across madrasahs that undertook major reform of their education on the basis of their own initiative. One major consideration in bringing about reform has been the expectations of the community of beneficiaries.

The IDD report draws attention to another major sphere of educational institutions, which may be included in the modernization package. Some Muslim scholars pointed out that the government must focus not so much on what is to be included in the curriculum but on providing good-quality education to all children, especially those belonging to the minority communities. According to the view, religious education is best served when the community has autonomy in its management. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) points out that the modernized madrasahs were unlikely to satisfy the educational needs of the community and madrasahs should not be looked upon as alternatives to the regular schools. The report recommends that madrasahs should be linked to a mainstream school board and madrasah qualifications to be recognized for purposes of admissions into institutions of higher education. This highlights the need to provide mainstream schools alongside
Madrasahs in areas whose population was predominantly Muslim. Such localities which the Sachar reports are Muslim-concentrated areas. The IDD report compares the state-madrasah relationship in matters of educational reform in two states with different political environments (Nair 2009: 36–56). The report selects Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The first of these has seen widely ranging ideologies among its political parties. Except for the Bharatiya Janata Party, all of the parties, at least in their stated objective, are favorably inclined toward the Muslim communities. In comparison, West Bengal has been ruled continuously by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) for three decades prior to 2010 (the year of the study). The report examines the status of madrasahs in the two states by analyzing, for one, how the state regulates the modernization program and, for another, how madrasas respond to such state interventions. The report’s survey is based on interviews, observation, and review of official documents.

According to the 2001 census, Uttar Pradesh had 22% of India’s 138 million Muslims, while West Bengal had 18%. In Uttar Pradesh, the integration of modern subjects with the religious curriculum antedates the state-led madrasah modernization program. One madrasah, popularly called Nadwa (Nadwatul ulama), in Lucknow (Esposito 2004: 226) was a pioneer in introducing modern subjects in its curriculum. The Nadwa provides education from the primary to the postgraduate level in theology and Arabic literature with the full course covered over a period of 16 years. The 5-year primary-level course is similar to primary education in secular mainstream schools but also includes Arabic literature and Islamic studies. At the advanced school levels, the subjects include Arabic literature and Islamic studies, with English representing the mainstream subject. At least two universities, Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi (Talib 1998: 156–189) and Aligarh Muslim University at Aligarh (Hasan 1998: 189–220), recognize its degrees as on a par with the graduate and postgraduate degrees in mainstream universities.

In spite of the government’s willingness to provide support, funds, and resources, only a little over 10% of the madrasahs in the state have so far been recognized, and a smaller percentage have received grants. The IDD report reviewed one of the districts and observed that, out of an estimated 200 madrasahs, only 52 had been recognized and only 7 of these received government aid. Another thirty madrasahs were recipients of the aid linked to the madrasah modernization program of the central government (Nair 2009). The IDD report observes how the staffs were paid only for a period of 3 months, and the central government did not release the subsequent grant, as it had not received the utilization certificate, related to the previous grant. The report mentions some independent madrasahs that exercised their discretion in limiting their formal relationship with the state to what was mandatory. Some madrasahs cited reasons for deliberately minimizing their relationship with the state as they did not wish to compromise their autonomy in raising funds from other sources. There were also genuine reasons as to why some madrasahs failed to apply to the state’s program of modernization. One such reason lay in poor circulation and awareness of the government program. The modernization program also suffered a setback in the fact that there were serious problems in its implementation and the slow pace of providing the materials. In one of the schools,
there was a discrepancy between the higher salaries of regular teachers in mainstream government schools and those paid to the teachers in madrasahs. Some madrasah teachers even formed their union in order to articulate this difference.

The madrasah education of the state of West Bengal (Nair 2009: 61–75) is classified in three parallel categories: 1) Kharzi madrasah, which is not recognized by the state government and teach up to the Ālim level equivalent to senior school; 2) an old system called “senior madrasahs,” which offer degrees of Ālim, Fāzil and Mumtāzel-Muḥaddithīn, these being in theology and Islamic studies; and 3) a new system of “high madrasahs” in which education has been modernized and is gradually being brought up to par with the standards of the regular government high-school course. The high-school madrasahs are in turn divided into junior classes from one to five and high madrasahs with classes from six to ten. The IDD Report points out how Kharzi madrasahs conduct their own curriculum without support from the state, but the senior madrasahs and high madrasahs are affiliated to the State Madrasa Board.

Established in 1927, West Bengal’s board, now the West Bengal Board of Madrasa Education, is one of the oldest in the country. The board has the power to direct, supervise, and control both the high and senior madrasahs according to the guidelines provided by the school education department of the state government. Unlike the state-supported madrasas in Uttar Pradesh, the West Bengal state government appoints its own nominee and a member from the local panchayat (village council) to the management committee of each madrasah. It has both executive and political oversight and control. The board funnels the state funds for training of madrasah members, provision of teaching and learning materials, vocational courses, teacher-training modules, etc. The program comes up for a regular evaluation during the course of a year. The board ensures a secular and co-educational character of education and effective process of mainstreaming the curriculum.

The study draws attention to the areas that need to be further explored to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the state-madrasah relationship in India with respect to the reform of religious education. The report underlines the need to study the motives and socioeconomic characteristics of parents sending their children to madrasahs.

**Madrasahs and the Issue of Reform**

As mentioned, the domain of madrasah reform involves the state initiatives as well as self-directed interventions of madrasahs. The present outline draws upon Yoginder Sikand (2005: 140–193) to capture how madrasahs and their critics view the issue of madrasah curricular reform. The popular discourse associates madrasah reform with state interventions alone. Some religious groups have actively pursued radical changes in madrasah curriculum independent of state directives. The state-led reform sometimes glosses over the different purposes behind the secular and religious instructions. One principal of Darul Uloom Deoband, Qārī Muḥammad Tayyeb, responded to ignoring the difference:
when people criticise the madrasa syllabus, they forget that the aim of the madrasa is different from that of a modern school. . . . The only way to pass judgment on the madrasas is to see how far they have been able to achieve their own aims, such as inculcating piety, promoting religious knowledge, control over the base-self (*tahzīb-i nafs*) and service of others. Therefore, no suggestion for reform of the syllabus that goes against those aims is acceptable. (Sikand 2005: 141)

Sikand points out that the critics of madrasah see the

institution stereotypically, often generalising madrasas to be backward and conservative. This is seen as a major hurdle in social progress. Where standards of secular education and what these aim to achieve are drawn upon to evaluate a madrasa, then there is a possibility that a madrasa comes to be seen as unproductive. (ibid.: 142)

Sikand quotes one such comment of a modernist critic of madrasah

. . . Indian madrasas are completely oblivious of the repeated directions in the Holy Quran regarding the need to . . . study . . . scientific phenomenon [sic] . . . Islam cannot be defended by these ‘misfits’ who know nothing of modern knowledge. (ibid.)

Sikand criticizes the modernist response and makes three major points. First, it is misleading that all madrasahs resist change. Second, to say that madrasahs are conservative is actually to state the obvious, i.e., they are custodians of Islamic orthodoxy. Therefore, many ulamā see no need for major reform. However, some ulamā have expressed concern where the conservative objectives don’t translate into the expected outcomes. One professor of hadīth at the Darul Uloom Deoband, Maulana Saeed Ahmad Palanpuri, reflects over the cause of such falling standards. These are due to “. . . the lack of adequate experts in various disciplines, the carelessness of the students and their unwillingness to work hard” (ibid.: 143). Another ālim, the principal of Deobandi madrasa in Mewat, Haryana, takes the view that it is not the madrasahs but the secular universities that were in need of urgent reform as they are beset “. . . with such problems as free sex, lawlessness and crime . . .” (ibid.).

At the same time, the ulamā who are engaged in reforming madrasahs for their own reasons clarify that the inclusion of worldly subjects must not dominate religious sciences. In their view, the minimum expectations from students learning the modern subjects are limited to reading and speaking of elementary English, solving numerical problems, and familiarization with basic social sciences. These outcomes are assumed to be the elementary functional knowledge for living in the modern world. It was even pointed out that if the secular subjects add to the burden of the student, then it is likely to dilute their attention required for religious study.

Responding to the demand of reforming madrasah syllabus, the Darul Uloom Deoband organized a conference in 1994 on the theme of reform of the syllabus of the Islamic institutions. In the inaugural lecture, the rector of the institution clarified that many schools in the country were available for Muslim children who wished to study modern subjects. He further clarified that the secular and religious branches of knowledge were entirely different and mutually opposed in terms of the goals these
pursued. One important resolution of the conference was that the challenges of modern life could be dealt with the knowledge of the Qur’ān, hadīth, and fiqh. There was no need for them to take the help of western knowledge and culture (ibid.: 148). However, a network of alumni of Deoband madrasah, named Tanzim Abna ul-Qadim, did not entirely endorse the view. Their association sought to promote, alongside the study of the Qur’ān, hadīth, an awareness of national and international affairs, hand in hand with support for religious and modern education. The association’s monthly magazine, in Urdu, Tarjuman-i Dar ul-Ulum, is an important vehicle in the transmission of ideas in favor of the madrasah reform. The magazine carries articles by scholars and teachers who are part of the network. The magazine also features articles invoking certain practices and suggestions that were given by responsible ulamā but forgotten on account of the difficult debate around the reform of madrasah curriculum. One contributor to the magazine, a graduate of Deoband, supported the need to broaden the mind of younger ulamā by familiarizing them with subjects such as mathematics, science, social sciences, Hindi, and English. In support of his view, he cites how the founder of the madrasah introduced Sanskrit for teaching at Deoband. In a similar vein, another reformist ulām, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi, proposed the inclusion of Hindi as well as knowledge of modern law in the madrasah curriculum. Sikand quotes the views of the editor of the magazine, Waris Mazhari, who argues for the inclusion of “…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, atheism, Marxism, Hindutva and so on” (ibid.: 153).

The continuous pressure of the new thinking and of the dramatic state responses to 9/11 prompted the Darul Uloom Deoband to launch two new departments regarding the teaching of the English language and computer literacy and applications. The madrasa students who are able to clear the fāzil course get an opportunity to take admission in the new departments. The madrasah has also organized a special media unit to liaise with journalists and other media reporters regarding the official views of the institution.

**Madrasahs for Self-Reform**

Some institutions and organizations, bearing the broad motif of Islam, have shown demonstrable enthusiasm to combine modern subjects with religious learning. One example Sikand (2005: 198–199) refers to is Jama’at-i Islami Hind’s central school at Rampur, named Markazi Darsgah. The institution’s objective is to train volunteers for the spread of its ideology. This requires that the students develop some understanding of the affairs of the world. The Darsgah has also replicated itself into similar institutions in India following common syllabi. Sikand points out, on the basis of Jama’at sources, that the network consists of 1,617 primary schools, 65 secondary schools, and 51 high schools, as well as 15 institutes for technical education. The Darsgah’s schooling goes up to sixth grade. Subsequently, the students join regular
schools. In conformity to Jama‘at’s view of Islamic education, students at the Darsgah learn a mix of religious and modern disciplines.

Another Jama‘at-sponsored initiative is established in Jamiat-ul-Falah in Uttar Pradesh (Sikand 2005: 200–204). The educational institution offers the conventional Ālim and Fāzil degrees, but at the same time, certain optional subjects are included in the latter degree, such as journalism, calligraphy, comparative religion, Islamic missionary work, Hindi, foundational Sanskrit, social welfare, and teacher training. After the junior high-school level, the students join a 7-year specialized course in Islamic studies and Arabic, with English, geography, history, comparative religion, political science, and sociology.

The Jama‘at-i Islami’s educational experiments have found roots in the southern part of India, especially Kerala (ibid.: 204–209). In the state, the schools run under the broad supervision of the Jama‘at prepare students for both the Ālim course and also the undergraduate degree from the regular state university. Similar schools can be seen in other places, such as Hyderabad, Jalgaon, Aurangabad, and Delhi. The medium of instruction in these schools remains English, the syllabus government prescribed, with the Markazi Maktaba-i Islami providing the additional textbooks in Islamic studies. Other successful examples of modernizing madrasahs are the Markaz ul-Ma‘arif Education and Research Center in Mumbai, established in 1982 by a Deoband madrasah graduate (ibid.: 206–207). The school spawns a network of other English-medium schools, orphanages, modern hospitals, and institutions of vocational training. The school publishes Islamic literature in various Indian languages, engages in interfaith dialogue, and contributes to some of the well-known national welfare funds. The Markaz liaised with the Deoband madrasah and established an institution in Delhi (now moved to Mumbai) for training madrasah graduates in English, computer applications, Arabic, and Urdu journalism. The main aim of the project was to equip madrasah graduates in finding employment in the wider world and at the same time engage in a meaningful conversation with ordinary people about Islam’s positive teachings.

Another experiment of reforming madrasas is Dar ul-Umoom, situated in Karnataka (ibid.: 208–209). This madrasah draws its inspiration from the legendary Muslim ruler, Tipu Sultan, who promoted scientific innovations through an institution with the same name. The educational program combines Islamic and modern science to produce the socially engaged ulamā. The school organizes a weekly program for its students in participatory learning in local schools, nongovernmental organizations, science-based institutions, and museums. As part of interfaith dialogue, the students additionally visit various places of worship. The eligible students are encouraged to pursue their graduate degrees from the state’s Open University. One other madrasah that has successfully combined Islamic and modern education is the Jamiat-ul-Hidaya in Jaipur (ibid.: 210–211). The madrasah was established by an ālim and a ṣūfī, claiming allegiance to the Deobandi tradition; the madrasah offers traditional Islamic education supplemented by compulsory modern subjects until the year 10. This segment of education relies on the government’s mainstream textbooks. Subsequently, the students are offered a 4-year Ālim course besides the religious subjects and encouraged them to acquire a vocational skill for gainful employment
after their graduation. Some of the vocational subjects include computer applications, mechanical and electrical engineering, electronics, and communications. The Barelwis too have their share in the modernization pursuit evident in the courses running in Madrasah Ashrafiya in the eastern Uttar Pradesh (Alam 2011: 94–106). The madrasah manages Hafiz-e-Millat Technical Institute with a purpose of equipping students with skills that would secure them jobs in the employment market.

In response to the vibrant trend of educational reform in madrasahs in India, Darul Uloom Deoband has two new departments of learning English as a second language and computer literacy courses. Likewise, the madrasahs in Uttar Pradesh, under the administrative supervision of Dini Talimi Council, ensure that the educational curriculum represents a balance of religious and secular subjects. Upon successful completion of the given stage, students receive certificates for admission in mainstream schools. Some madrasahs encourage their students to enter into vocational training or small trade. Sikand (2005: 212) provides the illustration of Jamiat ul-Islamia Khair ul-Ulum in Uttar Pradesh which has made arrangements for students who have successfully completed their Fāzil stage and training opportunities to become welders, tailors, and motor mechanics. Some madrasahs who are not able to do so have organized their timetable in a manner that enables their students to attend regular schools. Another variant of the trend in blending the religious and modern education is an attempt, on the part of some madrasahs, to establish institutions where this is implemented under a common management. Drawing its directive from the Madani Memorial Trust, a polytechnic for girls as well as a school is set up at the Deoband. In Kerala, the Markaz us-Shaqafat us-Sunniya manages Islamic colleges in the state, several modern schools, a vocational training center, a health clinic, and children’s homes. The Delhi-based Abdul Kalam Islamic Awakening Center manages regular co-educational high schools and sizeable madrasahs. This trend represents a diversity of experiments where the gap between the religious and mainstream educational systems is bridged.

**Madrasahs for Girls**

Madrasah reform in India also branches off into religious education exclusively for girls (Winkelmann 2005, 2008: 105–122; Sikand 2005: 214–222). This trend is salient among various denominational traditions. Field-based research on girls’ madrasahs highlights that these have grown in both quality and number. An ethnographic representation of case studies of girls’ madrasahs should foreground whether or not the Muslim community now sees its women as communicators of religious knowledge alongside their role as mothers. One notable instance of girls’ madrasahs in India is Jamiatul-Salihat in Maharashtra (Sikand 2005: 218). Established in 1973 by an ālim from Deoband, the madrasah has a boarding arrangement for girls, observing strict purdah and never allowing a student to leave the premises without a close male relative as chaperone. A graduate scholar from Deoband, who founded the All-India Ta’limi-o-Milli Foundation, in Bihar, spawns a network of maktabas, a high school for girls, and an engineering college. A
parallel in Delhi is Madrasa Jami‘at ul-Banat in Abul Fazal Enclave. The minimum requirement for admission to the ālimah (female ālim, or religious scholar) course is that the girls have successfully cleared their seventh year in primary schooling. The course claims its affiliation to dars-i nizāmī and is orientated toward religious matters specific to women. In addition to religious subjects, the madrasah provides for vocational courses such as stitching, knitting, and embroidery, alongside the learning of English, based on textbooks from the national curriculum. The madrasah emphasizes special tarbiyat (nurturing the virtuous character) focusing on the ideal gender norms in the Islamic tradition. A variant of this experiment in the tradition of Jam‘at-i Islami is a number of girl madrasahs in various parts of India. Alam (2011: 104) shows how Madrasah Ashrafiya in Mubarkpur has expanded its area of activities in founding “mainstream” schools in the adjoining areas, especially for girls.

The above is a brief account of how the reformed educational institutions among Muslims in India have promoted female literacy, women’s participation in mosques, and a widespread bridging of religious and modern education. Some of these institutions are affiliated to modern universities and receive grants from the government. The movement for spreading education has led to the establishment of scores of schools and colleges, polytechnics, industrial training institutions, printing presses, computer outfits, health care and medical centers.

Responses from the Field on “Modernization” of Madrasahs

In a focus group research (Talib 2007: passim.) intended to capture the field-based perceptions on state-led initiatives to modernize madrasahs to encourage “moderate Islam,” most participants were not aware that madrasah-going children were as small as 6.3% of the total population of school-age children. This percentage calculated in the Sachar et al. report (2006: 78) combines estimates of school-age children going to both madrasahs and maktabas. The participants had differing views on the need to modernize madrasah education. Many asked, “Why can’t the modern education we wish to see in madrasahs, be provided through the secular schools.” Some noted that, “Not all madrasahs are similar. Nor do they have similar surroundings. The reform program should also differ from one madrasah to the other.”

The story of Islamic education in a Tamil town Kilakkarai (Tschacher 2006: 196–223) is not spurred by the usual denominational affiliations. The mainstreaming of the curriculum is driven under the impact of competition between the Islamic and secular education. In an attempt to attract funders and students, the Ālim Arusi degree in the Jamia Arusiyaa allows its students to attend a secular school or college. Another Arabic college Jamia Sayyid Hamida cooperates with secular colleges allowing madrasah students to benefit from the infrastructure of the colleges.

The following illustrations refer to the internally differentiated universe of madrasahs. This helps clarify that modernization efforts have to be sensitive to the local needs and their social and cultural context rather than imposing a common “pill”
to reform every madrasah. A 56-year-old Qurʾān instructor organizes a “mobile madrasah” in a pastoral community, van gujars (forest dwellers), who travel annually from the pastures in the foothills of the Himalayas. For this teacher, religious instruction contributes to this group’s īmān (faith) which is necessary for living in difficult conditions. Similarly, the Madrasa-e Islamia Muttasil Mangalore caters to the needs of the peasant communities in neighboring villages, some 80 kilometers from a well-known madrasah. The madrasah harbors no pretensions, according to the school’s principal, of training the students to become the bābū and sāhib, terms used to deride the modern salaried man. “If you replace fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) with physics, would the graduate get a job?” asked the principal. “Can education on its own cure the ills of economy?” asks another respondent (Talib 2007: 110).

Some responses proved critical of secular schools and skeptical of the modernization projects for the madrasahs. One man noted that, “Degrees don’t get you the jobs on their own (khud-bakhud). For this reason, one finds a large number of educated youth who are jobless. A nominal change in the curriculum doesn’t help you get a job?”, he added. Another stated, “In most schools and colleges secular education lacks quality. It is also insensitive to the special needs of minorities and is not able to retain the Muslim students for longer schooling.”

The parental choice between secular or madrasah degree and its relationship to livelihood is a proposition which lacks supporting field-based evidence. One also needs to raise a question, “What kind of livelihood domains allow families to send their wards to opt for madrasah as part of acquisition of their necessary cultural capital?”. One may focus on trading communities and Muslims in the informal sector of economy where knowledge derived from madrasah system forms an important cultural costume providing identity and coping mechanisms in crisis in everyday survival.

**Conclusion**

Reforming and modernizing madrasahs in India refers to both a policy document and a program derived out of it. Between the text and its implementation at the institutional reality of madrasahs, there are several important aspects that together constitute a complex picture of state and madrasah relations. The policy document translates into programs but not entirely. The policy document also has rhetorical value for the state. The program in turn is dependent on the bureaucratic channels that facilitate and obstruct it at the same time. Subsequently, the program has both intended and unintended consequences for both the institution and its community of learners and their communities. One gets little understanding of what the program does to its beneficiaries, the students, and in their turn communities of belonging. The reality of unrecognized madrasahs needs separate exploration in future researches. This segment of madrasah universe in India represents an uninhibited posture of nonacceptance of any policy overtures as well as a critical attitude toward the state and the mainstream society and its institutions. In the madrasah universe,
one comes across madrasahs that opted for educational reform (modernization) on their own. These madrasahs provide a contrasting picture in comparison to the state-induced reform. The modernization program is followed by different social outcomes.

References


