

The Madrassa and the State of Pakistan
Religion, poverty and the potential for violence in Pakistan.

The madrassas of Pakistan are said to be the breeding ground for much of South and Central Asian militancy, but for the accusations made there is precious little known about these Islamic seminaries and their students. While conceding the radical bent among the madrassas of Pakistan, and the sharp increase in their numbers, a Islamabad scholar dissects the cause behind these phenomena and locates it – poverty.

by Tariq Rahman

Madrassas have come to be associated with the erstwhile Taliban rulers of Afghanistan, some of whom were students of these institutions. These Islamic seminaries have also been much in the news for sectarian killings and supporting militancy in Kashmir. They are considered the breeding ground of the jihadi culture—a term used for Islamic militancy in the English-language press of Pakistan.



Jamia Haqqaniya Madrassa in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan.

There was not much writing on the madrassas in Pakistan before the events of 9/11. JD Kraan, writing for the Christian Study Centre, had provided a brief introduction in 1984 and in 1988, AH Nayyar, an academic, had argued that sectarian violence was traceable to madrassa education. Both had used only secondary sources. Later, the present writer wrote a book on language-teaching in the madrassas (*Language, Ideology and Power: Language-Learning among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India*, OUP, Karachi 2002), which also contained a survey of the opinions of madrassa students on Kashmir, the implementation of the Sharia, equal rights for religious minorities and women, freedom of the media, democracy, and so on. The seminal work on the ulema, and also the madrassas in which they are trained, is by Qasim Zaman. He provides an excellent review of how the traditional ulema can be differentiated from the Islamists who react to modernity by attempting to go back to fundamentalist, and essentially political, interpretations of Islam.

The ulema or the Islamists in Pakistan have been writing, generally in Urdu, in defence of the madrassas which the state sought to modernise and secularise. Two recent books, a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (patronised by the revivalist, Islamist, Jamat-i-Islami) of the madrassas and a longer book by Saleem Mansur Khalid, are useful because they contain much recent data. Otherwise the Pakistani ulema’s work is polemical and tendentious. They feel themselves besieged increasingly by Western and Pakistani secular critics and feel that they should defend their position from the inside rather than wait for sympathetic outsiders to do it for them (as done by Yoginder Sikand in *Himal Southasian* in 2001, “The Indian State and the Madrassa”).

Type and number of madrassas

There is hardly any credible information on the unregistered madrassas. However, those which are registered are controlled by their own central organisations or boards. They determine the syllabi, collect registration fees and examination fees. They send examination papers, in Urdu and Arabic, to the madrassas where pupils sit for examinations and declare results.

At independence there were 245, or even fewer, madrassas in Pakistan. In April 2002, Dr. Mahmood Ahmed Ghazi, the Minister of Religious Affairs, put the figure at 10,000, with 1.7 million students. They belong to the major sects of Islam, the Sunnis and the Shias, but mostly the former, Pakistan being a predominantly Sunni country. Among the Sunni, there are three sub-sects: Deobandis, Barelvis and the Ahl-i-Hadith (salafi). Besides these, the revivalist Jamat-e-Islami also has its own madrassas.

Central Boards of Madrassas in Pakistan			
Name	Sub-Sect	Place	Established
Wafaq ul Madaris	Deobandi	Multan	1959
Tanzim ul Madaris	Barelvi	Lahore	1960
Wafaq ul Madaris (Shia) Pakistan	Shia	Lahore	1959
Rabta-tul-Madaris-al-Islamia	Jamat-i-Islami	Lahore	1983
Wafq-ul-Madaris-al-Salafia	Ahl-i-Hadith	Faislabad	1955

The number of madrassas increased during General Zia ul Haq’s rule (1977-1988). During the war by Islamic Afghan groups in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, the United States sent in money, arms and ammunition through Pakistan which is said to have been used to support the madrassas. Later, presumably because

religiously inspired and madrasa students infiltrated across the line of control to fight the Indian Army in Kashmir, they were supported by the Pakistan army (specifically the Inter Services Intelligence agency). However, both the ISI and the madrassas deny these links, and it is difficult to ascertain how many madrassas have increased due to financial aid provided by foreign donors or the Pakistan army.

In an analysis paper for the Brookings Institution in 2001, PW Singer gives the figure of 45,000 for madrassas in Pakistan but quotes no source for this number.

The Saudi Arabian organization, Harmain Islamic Foundation, is said to have helped the Ahl-i-Hadith and made them powerful. Indeed, the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, an organization which has been active in fighting in Kashmir, belongs to the Ahl-i-Hadith. In recent years, the Deobandi influence has increased as the Taliban were trained in their seminaries. However, contrary to popular belief, it is not the Deobandi but the other madrassas that have either got registered in large numbers since 1988 or actually increased significantly.

Sect-Wise Increase in the Number of Madrassas										
Deobandi		Barelvi		Ahl-i-Hadith		Shia		Jamati-Islami		Total
1988	2002	1988	2002	1988	2002	1988	2002	1988	2002	1988 2002
1779	7000	717	1585	161	376	47	419	97*	500	2801 9880

Source: For 1988 see GOP 1988; for 2002 Report of Sindh Police in Dawn 16 Jan 2003. The other figures have been provided by the Central Boards of madrassas. *This figure in GOP 1988 was for 'Others' and not only for the Jamati-Islami madrassas. The figure for 2000 given in several sources is 6,761.

However, it should be remembered that the number of Deobandi madrassas is the highest to begin with and they are the ones who are associated with militant policies and revivalist fervour.

Sectarian Divide among Madrassas

Because of the disintegration of the Mughal empire and colonial rule, Indian Muslims felt threatened, disillusioned and frustrated. Some, like Sayyid Ahmed of Rae Bareilly (1786-1831), responded militantly but were defeated. Others, like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1808-1898) learnt English, entered the British bureaucracy and became junior partners of the British in the exercise of power. Still others, blaming Muslims themselves for their loss of power, tried to purify Islam in various ways. The Ahl-i-Hadith (also called Wahabis), the Deobandis, the Barelvis among the Sunnis as well as the Shias created madrassas to preserve and propagate what, in their view, was the correct interpretation of Islam (or maslak = creed). These madrassas are described below.

Deobandis. The madrasa at Deoband, a small town in the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) of India, was founded by Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi (1833-1877) and Maulana Rashid Ahmed Gangohi (1829-1905). While earlier seminaries were loosely organised, Deoband had a rector (sarparast), a chancellor (muhtamim) and the chief instructor (sadr mudarris). Its income was derived from popular contributions and the curriculum was based on the Dars-i-Nizami which had been evolved by Mulla Nizam Uddin Sihalvi (d. 1748) at Farangi Mahall, a famous seminary of a family of Islamic scholars (ulema) in Lucknow. The Dars-i-Nizami emphasised studies based on human reasoning (maqulat) but at Deoband the traditional sciences which were transmitted unchanged to the learner (manqulat) were emphasized. Thus, Deoband taught much more hadith than the Dars-i-Nazami had originally prescribed.

Increase in the Madrassas (1988 -2000) (in percentages)	
Deobandi	8
Barelvi	90
Ahl-i-Hadith	93
Shia	532
Others	Not known
Total	136

Source: Saleem Mansoor Khalid (ed) Deeni Madaris Mein Taleem, IPS, Islamabad 2002.

The Deobandis opposed the folk Islam in which intercession by saints occupied a major place, seeking initiation in a mystic order was considered the path to salvation, and miracles and other such phenomena were seen as the crucial and defining attributes of saints and prophets. They did not oppose mysticism altogether but did argue that adherence to the Islamic law (Sharia) was the path to mystical exaltation. They also opposed folk practices such as fixing days for distributing food to gain spiritual merit and celebrating the days of religious personages.

The Durul Uloom at Deoband was established in 1867 and after a hundred years it had produced 6,986 graduates and established 8,934 maktabas (schools) and madrassas (seminaries) teaching the Dars-i-Nizami. In 1967, the number of graduates from Pakistan was 3,191 (including those from East Pakistan). Today, the number of students exceeds 102, 865 and the number of those who appeared in the Alimia (MA) examination exceeds 4500.

The number of registered madrassas in Pakistan is 7000 which shows how fast they have multiplied in recent years (all the above figures are from the central office of the Wafaq-ul-Madaris, Multan).

Barelvis. The Barelvi movement was inspired by the highly revered Ahmed Raza Khan of Bareilly (1856-1921). The Barelvis justified the “mediational, custom-laden Islam, closely tied to the intercession of the pirs of the shrines”, as one scholar puts it. They believe that prophet Mohammad (Peace be Upon Him) was made of Divine Radiance (Noor) and had knowledge of the unknown (Ilm ul Ghaib). Both these beliefs were challenged by the Deobandis and the Ahl-i-Hadith ulema. Relating to this was the debate on the issue of the imkan-i-nazir – the question of whether God could make another person equal to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). The Barelvis denied the possibility while the others did not. The Barelvi madrassas in Pakistan also teach the Dars-i-Nazami and appeal to the ordinary folk of the country.

Ahl-i-Hadith. The movement inspired by Sayyed Ahmed was called Wahabi because, like Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab (1703-1792) of Saudi Arabia, Sayyid Ahmed and his associates also wanted to purify and reform Islam. They claimed to follow no particular school of jurisprudence— Hanafi, Shafi, Hambali, Maliki—and were called nonconformists (ghair muqallid = one who does not follow a fixed path) by their opponents. They used the term Jama’at Ahl-i-Hadith for themselves and appealed to the Government of India that the term Wahabi should not be used for them. The government concluded, ordering in 1886 that the term Wahabi be dropped from official correspondence. However it remains in currency. The Ahl-i-Hadith madrassas also teach the Dars-i-Nazami but they emphasise the Quran and Hadith and oppose folk Islam and common practices such as the anniversaries of saints, the distribution of food on religious occasions, and popular mysticism.



Students at Deoband, Uttar Pradesh.

Jamat-i-Islami. The Jamat-i-Islami is a revivalist political party created by Abul ala Maudoodi (also spelled Mawdudi) (1903-1979) whose life and achievements have been ably described by Syyed Vali Reza Nasr in Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism (OUP, New York 1996). Maudoodi believed in borrowing technology and other concepts from the West in order to empower the Islamic community. As such he favoured a more modernist education than the orthodox backers of the traditional madrassas. He did, however, also lay emphasis on refuting Western culture and intellectual domination. Maudoodi’s anti-Western critique tends to be more thorough, trenchant and appealing than that of the traditionalist seminarians. The traditional texts are taught in the Jamat’s madrassas but politics, economics and history is also emphasised with a view to preparing the young ulema for confronting the ideas of the West.

Besides the Sunni madrassas, there are Shia madrassas too as we have seen. The Shias believe that the successor of the Prophet (PBUH) was Ali Ibn-e-Abi Talib and not the first three caliphs whom Sunnis take to be his successors. They mourn the battle of Karbala, fought between the Prophet’s grandson Hussain and the Omayyad caliph Yazid bin Muawiya in 680 A.D. This led to the birth of the supporters of Ali and the rise of Shia Islam which has been described very competently by SHM Jafri in The Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam (OUP, Karachi 2000).

All the madrassas, including the Shia ones, teach the Dars-i-Nizami though they do not use the same texts. They also teach their particular point of view (madhab or maslak) which clarifies and rationalises the beliefs of the sect (Sunni or Shia) and sub-sect (Deobandi, Barelvi and Ahl-i-Hadith). Moreover they train their students to refute what in their views are heretical beliefs and some Western ideas. All madrassas teach modern subjects in some measure and with varying degrees of competence. Let us examine the teaching in the madrassas in some detail.

The Curriculum of the madrassas

Before Mulla Nizam Uddin standardised the curriculum known as the Dars-i-Nazami, different teachers taught different texts to students. Shah Abdul Rahim (d. 1718) had made an attempt to create a fixed curriculum which was taught at the Madrassa-i-Rahimiya and emphasized the manqulat (such as hadith). The Dars-i-Nazami, on the other hand, emphasized the maqulat. Thus there were more books on grammar, logic and philosophy than

The Dars-i-Nizami has come to symbolise the stagnation and ossification of knowledge. For Southasian students, they no longer explain the original texts being themselves in Arabic.

before. According to Francis Robinson in *The Ulema of Farangi Mahall and Islamic culture in South Asia* (Feroz Sons, Lahore 2002):

The significance of the enhanced emphasis on *ma' qulat* in the *Dars-i-Nizamiyya* lies in part in the superior training it offered prospective lawyers, judges and administrators. The study of advanced books of logic, Philosophy and dialectics sharpened the rational faculties and, ideally, brought to the business of government men with better-trained minds and better-formed judgement.

While this may have been the intention of Farangi Mahall's ulema, it is also true that the Arabic madrassas were much fewer (150) than the Persian schools (903) in 1850, presumably because they offered a more thorough grinding in Persian which facilitated entry into administrative jobs for their pupils. However, Farangi Mahall was established before the British created the category of 'Persian schools' and it does appear that the *Dars-i-Nizami* educated men were sought for employment outside the domain of religion at that time.

In Pakistan, however, the *Dars-i-Nizami* has been modified though the canonical texts are still there. In this writer's view, these texts are used as a symbol of continuity and identity. The madrassas saw themselves as preservers of Islamic identity and heritage during the colonial era when secular studies displaced the Islamic texts as well as the classical languages of the Indian Muslims -Arabic and Persian- from their privileged pedestal. Thus the madrassas, despite the desire to reform their courses, did not give up the canonical texts. The greatest critic of the madrassa curriculum was Maulana Maududi who argued that, being based on memorisation of medieval texts, the madrassas were not providing relevant education to the Muslim society.

However, though ancient works like *Sarf-e-Meer* and *Kafiya* remain in the course, easier and more modern books are used to supplement them. Arabic, for instance, is taught through modern and much easier texts than the canonical works mentioned in the *Dars-i-Nizami*. The canonical texts are taught in Arabic but, because students do not really gain competence in the language, they are either memorised or understood from Urdu translations available in the market.



Madrassa of Haqqaniya, Pakistan.

The *Dars-i-Nizami* has come to symbolise the stagnation and ossification of knowledge. It is taught through canonical texts which, however, are taught through commentaries (*sharh*); glosses or marginal notes (*hashiya*) and supercommentaries (*taqarir*). There are commentaries upon commentaries explained by even more commentaries. For the Southasian students, they no longer explain the original texts being themselves in Arabic. They have to be learned by heart which makes students use only their memory not their analytical powers. Indeed, the assumption on which the *Dars* functions is that the past was a golden age in which all that was best has already been written. What remains to the modern age is merely to preserve it.

It was this backward-looking nature of core madrassa texts which made Taha Hussain (1889-1973), the famous blind modernist scholar of Egypt, disillusioned with *Jamia Azhar* in Cairo. According to Abderlarshid Mahmoudi, the writer of a 1998 work on Taha Hussain's education:

On the collective level, entanglement in what was derivative and purely verbal, meant, among other things, the relegation of major and original works to oblivion. Thus a procedure whose role *raison d'etre* was to the conservation of tradition, resulted in a grave form of collective amnesia concerning what was best in Islamic culture, namely the classical heritage.

What was true of *Jamia Azhar* in 1902 (when Taha went to that seat of learning) is judged to be true of Southasian madrassas, or at least the *Dars-i-Nizami* component taught here, even today — and the judges are Arabic-knowing authorities such as Maudoodi and not only Western critics of the madrassas.

Refutation of Other Sects and Sub-Sects

Refutation (*Radd* in Urdu) has always been part of religious education. However, it is only in recent years that it has been blamed for the unprecedented increase in sectarian violence in Pakistan. According to A.H. Nayyar, who writes of madrassa education frozen in time, 'The madrassas have, not surprisingly, become a source of hate-filled propaganda against other Sects and the sectarian divide has become sharper and more violent'. However, it appears that there was much more acrimonious theological debate among the Shias and Sunnis and among the Sunnis themselves during British rule than is common nowadays. The militancy in sectarian conflict cannot be attributed to the teaching in the madrassas though, of course, the awareness of divergent beliefs does create the potential for negative bias against people of other beliefs.

Students in madrassas learn the theological debate (munazra). Barbara Metcalf describes the munazras between the Christians, Muslims and Arya Samajists in a 1982 book on Islamic revival in British India. She says:

The debates were, indeed, a form of social event, a public ritual, that took on new form and meaning in the late nineteenth century. In a society largely illiterate and equipped only minimally with modern forms of communication, they came to serve as a new forum for communicating issues at once religious and social (Metcalf 1982: 233).

These debates could also be very bitter, as the Deobandi-Barelvi munazras of 1928 put together in one collection called the Futoohat-e-Nomania, illustrate. Moreover, the pioneers of the sects and sub-sects did indulge in refuting each other's beliefs. For instance, Ahmed Raza Khan, the pioneer of the Barelvi school, wrote a series of fatawa (plural of fatwa = religious decree) against Sir Sayyid of Aligarh, the Shi'is, the ahl-i-Hadith, the Deobandis and the Nadwat ul-'Ulama in 1896. These were published as Fatawa al-Haramain bi-Rajf Nadwat al-Main in 1900. The Barelvis, in turn, were refuted by their rivals. The followers of the main debaters sometimes exchanged invectives and even came to blows but never turned to militancy as witnessed in Pakistan's recent history.

As the inculcation of sectarian bias is an offence, no madrassa teacher or administrator confessed to teaching any text refuting the beliefs of other sects. Maulana Mohammad Hussain, Nazim-e-Madrassa Jamiat us-Salfia (Ahl-i-Hadith), in Islamabad says that comparative religious was taught in the final Almiya (MA) class and it did contain material refuting heretical beliefs. Moreover, Islam was confirmed as the only true religion, refuting other religions. The library did contain books refuting other sects and sub-sects but they were not prescribed in the syllabus. Maulana Muhammad Ishaq Zafar of the Jamia Rizvia Aiz ul Uloom (Barelvi) in Rawalpindi says that books against other sects were not taught. However, during the interpretation of texts the maslak was passed on to the student. Students of the final year, when questioned specifically about the teaching of the maslak, said that it was taught through questions and answers, interpretation of texts and sometimes some teachers recommended supplementary reading material specifically for the refutation of the doctrines of other sects and sub-sects. (Maulana Mohammad Hussain and Maulana Muhammad Ishaq Zafar were the only ones among the many ulema and students who were interviewed for this article who were willing to be named.)

In some cases, as in the Jamia Ashrafia, a famous Deobandi seminary of Lahore, an institution dedicated to publishing, established in 1993, puts out 'only those articles and journals which are written by the scholars of Deoband school of thought. Moreover, in writings, sermons and conversation, the teachers refer to the pioneers of their own maslak so that the views of the sub-sect are internalised and become the primary way of thinking.

However, despite the denials, the printed syllabi of the following sects do have books to refute the beliefs of other sects. The Report on the Religious Seminaries, put out in 1988, lists several books of Deobandi madrassas to refute Shia beliefs, including Maulana Mohammad Qasim's Hadiyat ul Shia which has been reprinted several times and is still in print. There are also several books on the debates between the Barelvis and the Deobandis and even a 1998 book refuting Maudoodi's views. The Barelvis have included only one book Rashidiya (1672) by Abdul Rashid Deewan Jaunpuri under the heading of 'preparation for debates on controversial issues'. In some of the madrassas the other traditional text used for this purpose is the Sharifiya (1413) by Meer Sharif Ali Jarjani. It is not true, however, that the students are mired in medieval scholasticism despite the texts prescribed for them. They do put their debates in the contemporary context though they refer to examples on the lines established by the medieval texts. The Ahl-i-Hadith have given a choice of opting for any two of the following courses: the political system of Islam, the economic system of Islam, Ibn-e-Khaldun's Muqaddamah, the history of ideas, and comparative religious systems. The Shia courses list no book on this subject.

Recently published courses list no book on maslak for the Deobandis. The Barelvis mention 'comparative religions' but no specific works. The Ahl-i-Hadith retain almost the same optional courses as before. The Shia madrassas list books on beliefs which includes comparative religions in which, of course, Shia beliefs are taught as the only true ones. Polemical pamphlets claiming that there are conspiracies against the Shias are available. Incidentally such pamphlets, with warnings on alleged Shia deviations from the correct interpretations of the faith are also in circulation among Sunni madrassas and religious organisations.

Moreover, some guidebooks for teachers note that Quranic verses about controversial issues should be taught with great attention and students should memorise them. In one Barelvi book it is specified that teachers must

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make the students note down interpretations of the ulema of their sub-sect concerning beliefs and controversial issues so that students can use them later — i.e. as preachers and ulema.

The Jamat-i-Islami syllabus, dated 2002, mentions additional books by Maulana Maudoodi and other intellectuals of the Jamat on a number of subjects including the Hadith. They also teach 'comparative religions'.

Refutation of Heretical Beliefs

One of the aims of the madrassas, ever since 1057 when Nizam ul Mulk established the famous madrasa at Baghdad, was to counter heresies within the Islamic world as well as outside influence which could change or dilute Islam. Other religions are refuted in 'comparative religions' but there are specific books for heresies within the Islamic world. In Pakistan the ulema unite in refuting the beliefs of the Ahmedis (or Qaidianis). The Deoband course for the Aliya (BA) degree included five books refuting Ahmedi beliefs. The Bareilvis prescribe no specific books. However, the fatawa of the pioneer, Ahmad Raza Khan, are referred to and they refute the ideas of the other sects and sub-sects. The Ahl-i-Hadith note that in 'comparative religions' they would refute the Ahmedi beliefs. The Shias too do not prescribe any specific book. The Jamat-i-Islami's syllabus of 2002 prescribes four books for the refutation of the 'Qaidiani religion'. Besides the Ahmedis, other beliefs deemed to be heretical are also refuted. All these books are written in a polemical style and are in Urdu which all madrasa students understand.

Refutation of Alien Philosophies

The earliest madrassas refuted Greek philosophy which was seen as intellectually invading the Muslim ideological space. Since the rise of the West, madrassas, and even more than them revivalist movements outside the madrassas, refute Western philosophies. Thus there are books given in the reading lists for Aliya (BA) of 1988 by the Deobandis refuting capitalism, socialism, capitalism and feudalism. These books are no longer listed but they are in print and in the libraries of the madrassas. The Jamat-i-Islami probably goes to great lengths — judging from its 2002 syllabus — to make the students aware of Western domination, the exploitative potential of Western political and economic ideas, and the disruptive influence of Western liberty and individualism on Muslim societies. Besides Maudoodi's own books on all subjects relating to the modern world, a book on the conflict between Islam and Western ideas by Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi is widely available.

These texts, which may be called Radd-texts, may not be formally taught in most of the madrassas as the ulema claim, but they are being printed which means they are in circulation. They may be given as supplementary reading material or used in the arguments by the teachers to be internalised by the students. In any case, being in Urdu rather than Arabic, such texts can be comprehended rather than merely memorised. As such, without formally being given the centrality which the Dars-i-Nizami has, the opinions these texts disseminate — opinions against other sects, sub-sects, views seen as being heretical by the ulema, Western ideas — may be the major formative influence on the minds of madrasa students. Thus, while it is true that education in the madrasa produces religious, sectarian, sub-sectarian and anti-Western bias, it may not be correct to assume that this bias automatically translates into militancy and violence of the type Pakistan has experienced. For that to happen other factors — the arming of religious young men to fight in Afghanistan and Kashmir; the state's clampdown on free expression of political dissent during Zia ul Haq's martial law; the appalling poverty of rural, peripheral areas and urban slums, etc. — must be taken into account.



Man studies the Quran at Darul Qura Madrasa, Pakistan.

As for teaching modern subjects, the Ahl-i-Hadith madrassas have been teaching Pakistan studies, English, Mathematics and General Science for a long time. The Jamat-i-Islami also teaches secular subjects. The larger Deobandi, Bareilvi and Shia madrassas too have made arrangements for teaching secular subjects including in the latest instance basic computer skills. According to a report in the weekly *The Friday Times* from Lahore the Deobandi Wafaq-ul Madaris has decided to accommodate modern subjects on a larger scale than before. They would make the students spend another two years to give a more thorough grounding in the secular subjects. The Wafaq is also said to have formed committees to devise ways to capitalise on the government's USD 255 million Madrasah Reforms Scheme for the transition. However, at present, the teaching is done by teachers approved of by the ulema or some of the ulema themselves. Thus the potential for secularisation of the subjects, which is small in any case, is reduced to nothing. This might change if the courses are extended by two years and the teachers come from diverse backgrounds but as yet it is too early to say what might happen.

Socioeconomic strata of madrasa students

In medieval India madrassas were supported by land grants and wealthy patrons. They have always been

supporting the poor, and the lifestyles of the ulema were spartan and closer to the poorer strata of society than the affluent ones. Maulana Abdul Ali Bahr al-Ulam of Farangi Mahall, for instance, used in their support all but Rs 40 of the Rs 1000 monthly stipend granted by Nawab Walajah. His 'wife and family suffered and complained, as did those of his grandson, Jamal al-Din, who suffered in a similar way'. Barbara Metcalf in her study of Deoband tells us that the pioneers of that seminary took very modest salaries if at all, and lived as poor men. The average expense of Deoband on each graduate between 1867 and 1967 was Rs 1,314 which is modest whichever way one looks at it. The Ahl-i-Hadith madrassas, which were patronised by wealthy people in British India, also lived in the same frugal manner.

Madrassas in present-day Pakistan are also financed by voluntary charity provided by the bazaar businessmen and others who believe that they are earning great merit by contributing to them. Some of them are also given financial assistance by foreign governments — the Saudi government is said to help the Ahl-i-Hadith seminaries and the Iranian government the Shia ones — but there is no proof of this assistance. And even if such assistance did exist, it would go only to a few madrassas whereas the vast majority of them are run on charity (zakat = alms, khairat = charity, atiat = gifts, etc).

The government of Pakistan gives financial assistance to the madrassas for modernising textbooks, for including secular subjects in the curricula, and in introducing computers into the classroom. In 2001-02 a total of Rs 1,654,000 was distributed among the madrassas which accepted the help. As the number of students is 1,065,277, this comes to Rs 1.55 per student per year. An additional aid of Rs 30.5 million is promised for providing computers and changing the syllabi in 2003-04, which will come to Rs 28.6 per student. However, as all madrassas do not accept financial help from the government the money would not be distributed as evenly as the above calculations might suggest.

According to the Jamia Salfia of Faisalabad, the annual expenditure on the seminary, which has about 700 students, is Rs 4,000,000. Another madrassa, this time a Barelvi one, gave roughly the same figure for the same number of students. This comes to Rs 5,714 per year (or Rs 476 per month), which is an incredibly small amount of money for education, books, board and lodging. The expenditure from the government in 2001-2002 was Rs 1,654,000 for all the madrassas in the country and about 32.6 percent madrassas do not received any financial support at all. What is obvious is that the total spending on madrassas is extremely modest.

As the madrassas generally do not charge tuition fees — though they do charge small admission fees which does not exceed Rs 400 — they attract very poor students who would not receive any education otherwise. According to Fayyaz Hussain, a student who completed his ethnographic research on Jamia Ashrafia of Lahore in 1994, nearly half the students joined the madrassa for economic reasons, 41 percent for social reasons, and only about six percent for religious pursuit. About three percent said they joined the madrassas in search of education and about two percent described the cause as 'political'.



PW Singer writes, the 'Dar-ul-Uloom Haqqania, one of the most popular and influential madrassas (it includes most of the Afghani Taliban leadership among its alumni) - has a student body of 1500 boarding students and 1000 day students, from six-year-olds upwards. Each year over 15,000 applicants from poor families vie for its 400 open spaces'. According to a survey conducted by Mumtaz Ahmad in 1976 'more than 80 percent of the madrassa students in Peshawar, Multan, and Gujranwala were found to be sons of small or landless peasants, rural artisans, or village imams of the mosques. The re-maining 20 percent came from families of small shopkeepers and rural laborers'. According to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies, 64 per cent madrassa students come from rural areas and belong to poor agrarian families. This researcher has also observed that many students, upon probing, confess that their parents had admitted them in the madrassas because they could not afford to feed them and educate them in the government schools. Even such students, while making this confession, insist that they are in the madrassas because of their love for Islam.

The Pakistani government's financial assistance to the madrassas for modernising textbooks, including secular subjects in the curricula, and introducing computers was a mere Rs 1.55 per student in 2001-02.

In a survey conducted by this writer with the help of a team in eight cities of Pakistan in December 2002 and January 2003, madrassa students and teachers were asked about their income. Among those who responded, 76.6 percent belonged to the poorer sections of society. The teachers of the madrassas also mostly (61 percent) belong to the same socio-economic bracket as their students. In essence the madrassas seem to provide

sustenance to these economically weak individuals. They are performing the role of providing welfare in a country which does not have a social security net. This being so, the influence of madrassas on rural people and the poorer sections of the urban proletariat will continue to increase as poverty increases.

Poverty and the Roots of Religious Violence

There is empirical backing for the statement that there is a link between poverty and religious violence. The scholar Qasim Zaman reports, for instance, that in Jhang—the birthplace of the militant Sunni organisation called the Sipah-i-Sahaba—the proportion of Shias in the affluent urban middle class is higher than in other areas of Pakistan. Moreover, the feudal gentry too have many Shia families. The Sipah-i-Sahaba appeals to the interests of the peasantry oppressed by the rich and the influential. Indeed, Maulana Haqq Nawaz, the fiery preacher who raised much animosity against the Shias, was 'himself a man of humble origin' and 'had a reputation for being much concerned with the welfare of the poor and the helpless, and he was known to regularly spend time at government courts helping out poor illiterate litigant's', reports Zaman.

Another leader of the Sipah-i-Sahaba, Maulana Isar al-Qasimi (1964-1991), also preached in Jhang. He too denounced the Shia magnates of the area. The peasants, terrorised by the feudal rich, responded as if the maulana were a messiah. Even shopkeepers rejoiced in the aggressive Sunni identity he helped create. When the Shia feudal lords attacked and burnt some defiant Sunni shops, this identity was further radicalised.

Indeed, Islamist movements from Turkey to Indonesia talk of the poor and the oppressed and sometimes do take up their cause. This has won them votes in Turkey where they have been suppressed by the secular military. Similarly, Muslim radicals in the Philippines too attack social and economic privilege. Poverty and oppression was also a major factor for mobilisation in Iran against the Shah who was seen as being rich, corrupt and decadent. Thus, Islamic militancy—whether by radicalised madrasa students or members of Islamist or jihadi groups in Pakistan—has a strong element of class conflict. In some part, this is a reaction of the have-nots against the haves. This is a dangerous trend for the country because madrasa students are taught to be intolerant of religious minorities and are hawkish about Kashmir. As they are also from poor backgrounds they express their sense of being cheated by society in the idiom of religion. This gives them the self-righteousness to fight against the oppressive and unjust system in the name of Islam.

Consolidated Data of Opinions Indicating Militancy and Tolerance among Three Types of School Students in Pakistan in Survey 2003 (in percentages)

Abbreviated Questions		Madrasahs	Urdu medium schools	English medium schools	Cadet Colleges/Public schools	Govt. Colleges (326)	Public Universities (206)	Private Universities (133)
1. Open War	Yes	59.86	39.56	25.86	36.92	46.01	34.95	35.34
	No	31.69	53.04	65.66	60.00	48.47	55.34	57.89
	Don't Know	8.45	7.39	9.48	3.08	5.52	9.71	6.77
2. Jehadi groups	Yes	52.82	33.04	22.41	53.08	50.00	46.12	34.59
	No	32.39	45.22	60.34	40.00	38.04	43.20	57.14
	Don't Know	14.79	21.74	17.24	6.92	11.96	10.68	8.27
3. Peaceful means	Yes	33.80	75.65	72.41	56.15	60.43	58.25	57.14
	No	54.93	18.26	18.97	36.92	22.70	28.64	35.34
	Don't Know	11.27	6.09	8.62	6.92	16.87	13.11	7.52
4. Ahmedis	Yes	12.68	46.95	65.52	41.54	38.04	38.83	40.60
	No	82.39	36.95	9.48	36.92	38.34	49.51	36.84
	Don't Know	4.93	16.09	25.00	21.54	23.62	11.65	22.56
5. Hindus	Yes	16.90	47.39	78.45	64.61	59.20	54.37	69.92
	No	76.06	42.61	13.79	31.54	31.90	38.83	21.05
	Don't Know	7.04	10.00	7.76	3.85	8.89	6.80	9.02
6. Christians	Yes	18.31	65.65	83.62	76.92	72.09	66.99	78.95
	No	73.24	26.52	8.62	18.46	21.17	29.13	14.29
	Don't Know	8.45	7.83	7.76	4.62	6.75	3.88	6.77
7. Women	Yes	16.90	75.22	90.52	67.69	65.34	64.56	76.69

No	77.46	17.39	6.03	25.38	30.98	31.55	17.29
Don't Know	5.63	7.39	3.45	6.92	3.68	3.88	6.02

NB: Figures for (3) are uninterpretable because some respondents ticked opinion (1) and/or (2) while also ticking (3).

Opinions of Faculty Members of Different Educational Institutions (in percentages)								
		Madrassas (27)	Urdu medium schools (100)	English medium schools (65)	Cadet Colleges/Public schools (51)	Govt. Colleges (127)	Public Universities (44)	Private Universities (127)
1. Open War	Yes	70.4	20	26.6	19.6	20.5	20.5	14.2
	No	22.2	70	64.6	68.6	68.5	63.6	77.2
	Don't Know	7.4	10	9.2	11.8	11.0	15.9	8.7
2. Jehadi groups	Yes	59.3	19	38.5	39.2	18.1	34.1	26
	No	26.6	68	50.8	52.9	63.8	45.5	63
	Don't Know	11.1	13	10.8	7.8	18.1	20.5	11.0
3. Peaceful means	Yes	29.6	85	60.0	66.7	77.2	68.2	75.6
	No	66.7	10	33.9	19.6	13.4	18.2	18.1
	Don't Know	3.7	5	6.2	13.7	9.5	13.6	6.3
4. Ahmedis	Yes	3.7	27	43.1	29.4	32.3	59.1	50.4
	No	96.2	65	36.9	62.8	52.8	59.6	34.7
	Don't Know	NIL	8	20.0	7.8	15	11.4	15
5. Hindus	Yes	14.8	37	61.5	60.8	41.7	68.2	66.1
	No	85.2	58	26.2	35.3	48.0	22.7	26
	Don't Know	NIL	5	12.3	3.9	10.2	9.1	7.9
6. Christians	Yes	18.5	52	81.5	60.2	59.1	75.0	68.5
	No	77.8	42	10.8	33.3	32.3	15.9	24.4
	Don't Know	3.7	6	7.7	5.9	8.7	9.1	7.1
7. Women	Yes	3.7	61	78.5	37.3	66.1	79.6	71.7
	No	96.7	33	13.9	58.8	30.7	15.9	22.1
	Don't Know	NIL	6	7.7	3.9	3.2	4.6	6.3

The Worldview of the Madrassa Student

The madrassa students can be considered the most 'intolerant' among the student categories of Pakistan. They are also the most supportive of an interventionist and aggressive foreign policy. In the survey of 2002-2003 for example, they responded to questions about the Kashmir issue by titling in favour of war to free the region from India (60 percent) and supporting jihadi groups to fight the Indian Army (53 percent) According to the Institute of Policy Studies survey quoted earlier madrassa students are tolerant of the major Islamic sects and sub-sects. About 45 percent, however, considered women to be lesser than men, and only 11 percent considered them equal to men. To the question, 'How can jihad be waged in Pakistan?' only eight percent students agreed with using force. However, 46 per cent Deobandi students favoured the Taliban as their model.

While the survey carried out for the present writers' study gives somewhat different results, it is clear that this is the result of difference in the way questions were put. The madrassas are obviously institutions which have a blueprint of society in their mind. What needs explanation is that the madrassas, which were basically conservative institutions before the Afghan-Soviet war of the 1980s, are today both ideologically activist and sometimes militant. According to Peter L. Bergen, author of a book on Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda group: 'nowhere is bin Laden more popular than in Pakistan's madrassas, religious schools from which the Taliban draw many of its recruits'. Even with the end of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the madrassas have plenty of zealous young people who can potentially act as crusaders against both Western interests and the moderate regimes, both military and civilian, whom they perceive as the allies of the West.

The State and the Students

General Pervez Musharraf's military government, in an attempt to control religious extremism, has made two laws to control the madrassas. The first was aimed to bring the madrassas in the mainstream by introducing secular subjects in them. This ordinance, called the 'Pakistan Madrassah Education (Establishment and Affiliation of Model Dini Madaris) Board Ordinance 2001' was promulgated on 18 August 2001. According to the Education Sector Reforms three model institutions were established: one each at Karachi, Sukkur and Islamabad. Their curriculum 'includes subjects of English, Mathematics, Computer Science, Economics, Political Science, Law and Pakistan Studies for its different levels. These institutions were not welcomed by the ulema. After this another law was introduced to control the entry of foreigners in the madrassas and keep check on them. This law — Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance 2002 — has, however, been rejected by most of the madrassas which want no state interference in their affairs. Indeed, according to PW Singer, only about one-tenth of the madrassas, agreed to be registered and the rest simply ignored the statute.

The madrassas became militant when they were used by the Pakistani state to fight in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and subsequently in Kashmir so as to force India to leave the region. Pakistan's claim on Kashmir, as discussed by many including the author Alastair Lamb, has led to conflict with India with the Islamic militants entering the fray since 1989. The United States indirectly, and at other times directly, helped in creating militancy among the clergy. For instance, special textbooks in Dari (Afghan Persian) and Pashto were written at the University of Nebraska-Omaha with a USAID grant in the 1980s. American arms and money flowed to Afghanistan through Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence. At the time all this was being done to defeat the Soviet Union. Later, when Pakistan's military kept using the militant Islamists in Kashmir, the United States had cause for alarm — not without reason as the events of 9/11 demonstrated later. It was only after the World Trade Centre attack that the Americans tried to understand the madrassas better. PW Singer, the analyst with the Brookings Institution was one of the experts who became engaged with the subject. According to Singer, about 10-15 percent of the madrassas are 'radical', including anti-American rhetoric in their instruction and even imparting military training. No proof for these claims is offered, but they are credible given the fact that madrassa teachers often repeat the line that the United States is at war with Islam.

Apart from the madrassas proper, religious parties—such as Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, Jaish-e-Mohammed and Harkat-ul-Mujahidin—print militant literature which circulates among the madrassas and other institutions. According to the book *Ideas on Democracy, Freedom and Peace in Textbooks* (published in 2003 by the group Liberal Forum and its "campaign against hate speech"), Ad-Dawah uses textbooks for English in which many questions and answers refer to war, weapons, blood and victory. According to the Liberal Forum, the textbooks have been authored to provide a one-dimensional world-view that restricts the independent thought process of the students.

Although these parties have been banned, their member are said to be dispersed all over Pakistan, especially in the madrassas. The madrassas, then, may yet remain potential centres of Islamic militancy in Pakistan. The government proposes to change this by teaching secular subjects in the madrassas, but change will come only

Militancy Among Madrassa Students in 2003 (N=142) (In percentages)

What should be Pakistan's Priorities?

1	Take Kashmir away from India by an open war?		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
	59.9	31.7	8.5
2.	Take Kashmir away from India by supporting jihadi groups to fight with the Indian army?		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
	52.8	32.4	14.8
3.	Support Kashmir cause through peaceful means only (i.e. no open war or sending jihadi groups across the line of Control)		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
	33.8	54.9	11.3

Militancy Among Madrassa Teachers (N=27) (In percentages)

What should be Pakistan's Priorities?

1	Open War		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
	70.4	22	7.4
2.	Jehadi Groups		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
	59.3	29.6	11.1
3.	Peaceful means		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
	29.6	66.7	3.7

when the level of poverty is reduced so that poor people can afford other systems of schooling. Above all, it will come when there is peace between India and Pakistan. The perception of the United States, as well as other Western powers, oppressing Muslims as in Palestine also plays a role in the reaction within the madrassas. Such global changes which are required to tackle the madrassa-based militancy or the intolerance which creates the potential for such militancy can hardly be brought about by any one government. It is futile to blame one country for a problem that is the product of history, of poverty, and of geo-political games of recent times.

Key

- A Hadith refers to all that is narrated from the Prophet, his acts, his sayings, and whatever he tacitly approved, in addition to all the reports which describe his physical attributes and character.
- Ahmedis take their name from Mirza Ghulam Ahmed (1835-1908), a Punjabi who in 1882 declared himself a mujadid ("renewer") of Islam. The Ahmedis shun jihad as a method of resistance against non-Muslims and believe that Prophet Muhammad was not necessarily Islam's final prophet.