

PAKISTANI MADRASAS: QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

by B.Raman

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What are madrasas?

Madrasas are Islamic religious seminaries, which were originally meant to train young persons, who wanted to take to religion as a profession. They wanted to work as clerics in mosques and as members of the staff in Islamic charitable institutions. In view of the limited career opportunities open to the students of the madrasas, only those who were keen to become religious clerics joined them. Till 1977, the number of madrasas in Pakistan was therefore, very small. There were only 244 madrasas in Pakistan in the 1950s. This number went up to about 500 in the 1960s and about 700 in the early 1970s. The military regime of the late Gen. Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) saw a mushrooming growth of the madrasas.

What were the reasons for this mushrooming growth?

Firstly, Zia allowed the Government Departments and the Armed Forces to recruit madrasa graduates to lower posts. This tremendously expanded the career opportunities available to the products of the madrasas. Secondly, Zia, a devout Deobandi, was attracted by Wahhabism. He permitted a large flow of money from Saudi Arabia for starting madrasas to spread the Deoband-Wahhabi ideology. Thirdly, Zia's military regime saw a decline in public investments in the social sector, particularly in education. As a result, in many rural areas, the only affordable schools available to the poor people were the madrasas. Fourthly, helped by the Saudi money, the madrasas started providing free boarding and lodging to their students. Many poor parents chose to send their children to the madrasas. This spared them the responsibility of finding money for their upbringing. The radicalisation of the madrasas was a post-1980 phenomenon.

What were the reasons for the post-1980 radicalisation of the madrasas?

Firstly, the Afghan jihad against the Soviet troops. The intelligence agencies of the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan used the madrasas for radicalising the Muslim youth and motivating them to join the Afghan Mujahideen in their jihad against the Soviet troops. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) got a number of text books prepared with the help of Wahhabi clerics of Saudi Arabia projecting Communism as anti-Islam and calling for jihad against the Communist evil in Afghanistan, had them printed in printing presses in the US and distributed to the madrasas. According to Mr. Ishtiaq Ahmed, Associate Professor of political science at the Stockholm University:

"The joint CIA-Saudi initiative resulted in a proliferation of madrasas, regardless of the genuine need for maulvis. Thanks to the CIA's 51 million US dollar grant to the University of Nebraska to produce pictorial textbooks glorifying jihad, killing, maiming and bombing other human beings was made sufficiently entertaining. Sadism could now be cultivated as a virtue. That was when madrasa doors were opened to the mass of the poor. The new "education" they received was to hate the Russians, later generalised to include any non-Muslim. Jews, Hindus and Christians figured prominently and out of it came the expression of a Yahud-Hunud-Nasara conspiracy against Islam. The phrase had never existed previously, but because of its Arabic sounds, it went readily to the hearts and minds of the Islamists. The Buddhists did not fit into the Yahud-Hunud-Nasara formula. But the Taliban by destroying the Buddha statues at Bamiyan indicated that even Buddhists were against Islam and therefore their symbolic presence in Islamic Afghanistan had to be annihilated." The textbooks prepared at the instance of the CIA taught the students that it was their religious obligation to wage a jihad against the Soviets and their stooges. The same textbooks are now being used after appropriate revisions to tell the students of their religious obligation to kill the Americans and their stooges. Secondly, Zia's concerns over the impact of the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 on the loyalty of the Shias of Pakistan. He encouraged the madrasas controlled by the Sunnis to include in their teachings the need to counter the Shia assertiveness.

What was the role of the madrasas in Afghanistan?

Nearly 3,000 students of the madrasas joined Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami and fought against the Soviet troops. In April 1992, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) asked the madrasas controlled by the religious fundamentalist organisations to declare a vacation to enable the students to join the Afghan Mujahideen in their final assault on Kabul, which led to the collapse of the Najibullah Government. The ISI issued them arms and ammunition at the border before they crossed over into Afghanistan. Similarly, in September 1996. The ISI asked these madrasas to declare a vacation to enable their students to assist the Taliban in its final assault on Kabul. They came back to the madrasas and resumed their studies after the Taliban had captured Kabul. The Taliban was and continues to be made up of the products of the madrasas, Afghans as well as Pakistanis.

What has been the role of the madrasas in the spread of jihadi terrorism in and from Pakistan?

All the leaders and cadres of the Sunni extremist Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ) and the Shia extremist Siph Mohammad, almost all the leaders of the Taliban and over 90 per cent of its cadres and over 70 per cent of the leaders and cadres of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM), the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), the Jaysh-e-Mohammad (JEM), and the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) are

products of the madrasas. However, less than 15 per cent of the members of the Al Qaeda are madrasa products. No leader of the Al Qaeda is known to have been a madrasa product.

What has been the role of the madrasas in the spread of jihadi terrorism to other countries?

The madrasa products of the HUM, the HUJI, the JEM and the LET play an active role in jihadi terrorism directed against India. All of them are Pakistani and not Indian nationals. A large number of foreign Muslims come to the madrasas to be qualified as religious clerics. The largest number of foreign students in the Pakistani madrasas are Afghans---from inside Afghanistan as well as from the Afghan refugee camps in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan. The second largest numbers are from South-East Asia, mainly from Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia. The third largest number are from the Central Asian Republics (CARs), mainly from Uzbekistan, and the Chechen province of Russia and the Xinjiang region of China.. The fourth largest number are from the Muslim communities in West Europe and North America. Of these, Pakistanis and persons of Pakistani origin constitute the maximum. The fifth largest group is from countries such as Yemen, Somalia, Bangladesh, Tanzania, and Australia. Presently, next to the Afghans, the Thais constitute the second largest number of persons enrolled in the madrasas, mainly of Karachi. Uzbeks constitute the third largest number, in terms of individual nationalities. Not all madrasa students go back to their respective countries as motivated jihadi terrorists. But all go back as Western-haters. Many of these Western-haters ultimately function as clerics in the mosques of their countries and use their position to preach hatred against the West, against the US in particular. Often, jihadi terrorists are made not in the madrasas, but in the mosques headed by clerics who had studied in the madrasas of Pakistan. Saudi religious organisations use the madrasas of Pakistan for spreading Wahhabism to the Muslims of other countries and for the Arabization of the Muslims of South-East Asia, who are viewed as soft because of the influence of the Indian culture and the Hindu religion on them. In its election manifesto for the October, 2002, elections to the Pakistan National Assembly, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the six-party fundamentalist coalition, had stated that if it came to power it would assist the jihad being waged by the people of the Southern Philippines, the Arakan area of Myanmar, the Jammu & Kashmir area of India, Palestine and the Chechen area of Russia. They have since included Southern Thailand also in the list of countries where Muslims are waging a jihad and whom they would assist. It is believed that the command and control of the jihad in Southern Thailand is now located in Karachi. In an editorial published on August 4, 2005, the "Daily Times", the prestigious newspaper of Lahore, wrote: "To our shame, nearly 1,200 religious schools under one organisation in Karachi alone are "teaching" all sorts of refugees

from Southeast Asia, including those from Thailand, many of whom have been returning home to raise the flag of a futile Islamic revolt."

What has been the role of the Pakistani madrasas in the radicalisation of the Muslim youth of Pakistani origin in West Europe and North America?

The Muslim youth of Pakistani origin studying in the madrasas of Pakistan fall into two categories---those who are sent by their parents in order to dilute the Western cultural influence on them and those, who come on their own in order to contribute to the cause of their religion. Some of them are already strongly anti-West before joining the madrasas and some become anti-West during their stay in the madrasas. In the last 20 years, there has been a steady increase in the number of Pakistanis, who have migrated to the West and in the number of mosques, which have come up in the West to cater to their religious needs. Since there are not many madrasas in the Western countries to produce qualified clerics to man these mosques, the Western Governments liberally issue medium and long-term visas to qualified clerics from Pakistan to come to the West and work in these mosques. Almost all of them are hate-mongers and use their position to spread hatred against the West to the religious congregation.

How are foreigners admitted or recruited to these madrasas?

Sometimes, foreign students directly apply. Sometimes, they are recruited by the preaching missions of the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), which visit these countries and then they are helped to join the madrasas, with offers of scholarships. When foreign students apply for a visa to come to Pakistan, they are expected to produce a no objection certificate from their Governments. Many circumvent this requirement by coming to Pakistan on tourist visas, joining the madrasas and then getting their visas extended with the help of the madrasa authorities. Those, who came on a tourist visa and manage to stay on, constitute the largest group. Their Governments are often not aware of their enrolling themselves in the madrasas. After the arrest of the brother of Hambali, the operational chief of the Jemaah Islamiyyah (JI), and some other Indonesians and Malaysians from madrasas of Karachi controlled by the LET and their deportation in 2003, the Pakistani authorities had issued instructions to tighten up admissions to the madrasas and to prevent persons with tourist visas from joining the madrasas. These instructions have been observed more in their breach.

What kinds of courses are run in the madrasas?

There are two kinds of courses. The certificate issued at the end of the first course is treated as the equivalent of the School-Leaving Certificate and the certificate issued at the end of the second course is treated as the equivalent of a university degree. Before Gen. Pervez Musharraf came to power, this equivalence was valid only for

recruitment to Government jobs. In 2002, he modified the electoral laws of the country and laid down that only persons holding at least a School-Leaving Certificate can contest elections to the local bodies and that only persons holding at least a university degree can contest elections to the provincial and National Assemblies. He made this equivalence valid even for election purposes in order to favour the candidates of the religious parties over those of the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians of Mrs. Benazir Bhutto and the Pakistan Muslim League of Mr. Nawaz Sharif. As a result, a large number of products of the madrasas, who had never had any general education, managed to get into the local bodies councils and into the provincial and National Assemblies. Many non-religious political leaders were weeded out of the political process on the ground that they were not graduates. Recently, he has abolished this equivalence in respect of the elections to the local bodies by laying down that a product of a madrasa cannot contest the elections unless he or she has also done, in addition to the madrasa course, a general education course in English, Urdu and Pakistan studies. The madrasas mostly teach Arabic and not Urdu. Nine students of madrasas challenged this order in the court of Chief Justice Iftikhar Husain Chaudhry of the Lahore High Court. On August 3, 2005, the court upheld the order and dismissed the petitions. Does this mean that the equivalence would no longer apply even to the elections to the provincial and National Assemblies and for recruitment to Government jobs? Possibly so, but the position is not yet clear.

What kind of training is given in the madrasas?

Eighty-per cent of the madrasas, which are not controlled by the fundamentalist organisations, mostly give religious education and no military training. Some of them even teach general subjects such as English, Urdu, Pakistani history, general science and even computer science. Those controlled by fundamentalist and jihadi terrorist organisations, which constitute about 20 per cent of the total, impart religious education plus basic military training with the help of ex-servicemen. Even they do not impart any terrorist training in subjects such as fabrication of explosives, assembling an improvised explosive device (IEDs), hijacking an aircraft etc. Such jihadi terrorist training are given in separate training centres, which are more often than not located away from the madrasas, though instances of the madrasas and the jihadi terrorist training centres being located within the same premises are not unknown as in the case of the LET. Only those students of the madrasas, who volunteer for jihadi terrorist training, are sent to these training centres. Hence, not every madrasa product is a potential jihadi terrorist, but every product of these training centres is a potential terrorist.

It has been reported that two of the perpetrators of the London explosions of July 7, 2005, had visited the madrasas of the LET and the JEM? Could they have undergone any training course there?

Not necessarily. Many foreign Muslims with extremist views visiting Pakistan prefer to stay in the hostels and the guest houses of the madrasas because boarding and lodging are free and they are not subject to police surveillance during their stay there. Thousands of foreign Muslims attending the annual congregation of the Tablighi Jamaat stay in the hostels and guesthouses of the madrasas. Before 1996, during his visits to Pakistan, Osama bin Laden used to stay in the guesthouse of the LET at Muridke, near Lahore. Just because a foreign Muslim visited a madrasa or stayed in its hostel does not necessarily mean that he underwent a training course there.

How many madrasas are there in Pakistan presently?

According to official figures of the Government of Pakistan, there are presently 11,221 madrasas in the country. Of these, 6,148 have been registered with the provincial governments under the Society Act 1860. The remaining 5,073 have refused to register themselves. According to unofficial figures, there are nearly over 20,000 madrasas. According to Mr. Ijazul Haq, Minister for Religious Affairs, who is the son of the late Zia, 8,000 madrasas were being run by Deobandi organisations, 1800 by Barelvi organisations, 400 by Alh-i-Hadees organisations, 382 by Shia organisations and 1,200 by the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI), the leading party of the MMA coalition. The total of the approximate figures (11,782) given by him slightly exceeds the total number of 11,221 given above. Eighty per cent of the total madrasas are run by different religious organisations with funds received from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The remaining are run by different fundamentalist and jihadi terrorist organisations, with funds from Saudi Arabia. Some of them such as those controlled by the HUM, the HUJI, the JEM and the LET also receive funds from the ISI.

What action has the Pakistan Government taken against the madrasas?

Successive Pakistan Governments since the days of Mrs. Benazir Bhutto have been concerned over the uncontrolled and uncontrollable activities of the madrasas. These madrasas, particularly those controlled by Deobandi organisations, not only spread anti-Western hatred, but also anti-Shia hatred. Madrasa products have been involved in almost all sectarian terrorist incidents in Pakistan. After 9/11, under American pressure, Musharraf announced a number of measures against the jihadi terrorist organisations and the madrasas. He banned many of these organisations, arrested their leaders and cadres, ostensibly froze their bank accounts, stopped their fund collection drive and issued an ordinance for the compulsory registration of the madrasas, which might have given the Government some control over their curriculum. Subsequently, under pressure from the MMA, which opposed the legitimisation of his election as the President in a referendum and of the various powers assumed by him through ordinances, he held in abeyance the implementation of these measures.

The jihadi terrorist organisations banned by him started operating under new names with new bank accounts and no action was taken against them. Their arrested leaders and cadres were released on the ground that there was no evidence of involvement in terrorism against them. No action was taken against the madrasas, which refused to register themselves. After the London explosions, he has again recycled the unimplemented orders of 2002 and re-enacted---for the third time since 9/11--- the charade of strong action against terrorist organisations and their infrastructure in Pakistani territory. He has ordered the police to act against the terrorist organisations, under whatever name they may be operating, arrest their leaders and cadres and stop their fund collection. He has also ordered all the unregistered madrasas to register themselves by December 31,2005, and asked the Government to expel all foreign students in madrasas. The madrasas have already announced that they would defy his orders. He has told foreign correspondents that he could not implement his previous two crack-downs strictly due to fears of a backlash and has promised that this time he meant business and would act firmly to put down terrorism from the Pakistani territory. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

What are the options before the international community and the Western governments?

To make it clear to Musharraf that continued economic and other assistance to Pakistan would depend on his implementing his promises this time and to free the mosques in the West frequented by residents of Pakistani origin of their present dependence on imported clerics from Pakistan for running them.

(The writer is Additional Secretary (retd), Cabinet Secretariat, Govt. of India, New Delhi, and, presently, Director, Institute For Topical Studies, Chennai, and Distinguished Fellow and Convenor, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Chennai Chapter. Email: itschen36@gmail.com)