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Madrasa: An Age-defied System of Education

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ABSTRACT

Madrasas are centers of free education. They are the nucleus of the cultural and educational life of Muslims. These Madrasas, as an invaluable instrument of traditional education, have played a vital role in spreading literacy among the down-trodden segments of the Muslim society. Only the poor segment of Muslim community is resigned to sending their children to Madrasas which not only offer them free education but also free boarding and lodging. Most of the Madrasas are averse to the introduction of modern secular education. However, some of the Madrasas have introduced modern education complemented with religious education.

Keywords : Madrasa, Traditional, Education, Muslim, Religious

Introduction

Madrasa (/məˈdræsə/, also US: /-rɑːs-/; UK: /ˈmædrɑːsə/; Arabic: مدرسة [maˈdrasa] , pl. مدارس, *madāris*) is the Arabic word for any type of educational institution, secular or religious (of any religion), whether for elementary instruction or higher learning. The word is variously transliterated *madrasah*, *medresa*, *madrassa*, *madraza*, *medrese*, etc. In countries outside the Arab world, the word usually refers to a specific type of religious school or college for the study of the religion of Islam, though this may not be the only subject studied.



In English, the term *madrasah* or "madrasa" usually refers more narrowly to Islamic institutions of learning. Historians and other scholars also employ the term to refer to historical *madrasah* institutions throughout the Muslim world, which is to say a college where Islamic law was taught along with other secondary subjects. These institutions were typically housed in specially designed buildings which were primarily devoted to this purpose. Such institutions are believed to have originated, or at least proliferated, in the region of Iran in the 11th century under vizier Nizam al-Mulk and subsequently spread to other regions of the Islamic world.

Background

The first institute of madrasa education was at the estate of Zaid bin Arkam near a hill called Safa, where Muhammad was the teacher and the students were some of his followers. After Hijrah (migration) the madrasa of "Suffa" was established in Madina on the east side of the Al-Masjid an-Nabawi mosque. Ubada ibn as-Samit was appointed there by Muhammad as teacher and among the students. In the curriculum of the madrasa, there were teachings of The Qur'an, The Hadith, *fara'iz*, *tajweed*, genealogy, treatises of first aid, etc. There was also training in horse-riding, the art of war, handwriting and calligraphy, athletics and martial arts. The first part of madrasa-based education is estimated from the first day of "nabuwwat" to the first portion of the Umayyad Caliphate at the beginning of the Caliphate period, the reliance on courts initially confined sponsorship and scholarly activities to major centres.

In the early history of the Islamic period, teaching was generally carried out in mosques rather than in separate specialized institutions. Although some major early mosques like the Great Mosque of Damascus or the Mosque of Amr ibn al-As in Cairo had separate rooms which were devoted to teaching, this distinction between "mosque" and "madrasa" was not very present. Notably, the al-Qarawiyyin (*Jāmi'at al-Qarawīyīn*), established in 859 in the city of Fes, present-day Morocco, is considered the oldest university in the world by some scholars, though the application of the term "university" to

institutions of the medieval Muslim world is disputed. According to tradition, the al-Qarawiyyin mosque was founded by *Fāṭimah al-Fihri*, the daughter of a wealthy merchant named *Muḥammad al-Fihri*. This was later followed by the Fatimid establishment of al-Azhar Mosque in 969–970 in Cairo, initially as a center to promote Isma'ili teachings, which later became a Sunni institution under Ayyubid rule (today's Al-Azhar University).

India

In the 21st century most of the madrasa schools around the globe have adopted scientific curriculum that have increased the employability of their students. The Singaporean madrasa system, for example, has begun using modern technologies like tablets.

A section of conservative Muslim clergy has been opposing the introduction of scientific and modern education every time the central government had attempted to amend the curriculum and improve teaching methods. To be sure, the state of madrasas across India is varied. For example, while madrasas in the northern part of India, particularly in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, have not adopted more modern curricula, those in Kerala are different—they are of the view that there is no separation of knowledge in Islam, and that the Prophet did not divide learning on the basis of what was “sacred” and what was “secular”. Indeed, Kerala’s Muslim tradition has other elements that do not conform to those in other regions of India. For example, Kerala’s Nadwat ul Mujahideen believes that there is no official clergy in Islam, and that a doctor or a management professional can lead a prayer. The Friday sermons in Kerala are read in the vernacular, Malayalam, while in the north Indian states, they are in Arabic and not translated to either Urdu or Hindi. Nadwat ul Mujahideen is a Salafi-influenced Islamic group in Kerala that has roots dating back to the 19th century. Founded in 1924, this renaissance group has been opposing the Sunni orthodoxy and their alleged ‘false beliefs’ such as polytheism. Nadwat ul Mujahideen claims to introduce ‘true’ Islamic practices to the Muslim community in Kerala. Nadvath ul Mujahideen also says it is catering to the state’s Muslims to create their own characteristics and peculiarities that distinguish them from other Muslim communities in India.

In 2008, India’s madrasas were estimated to number between 8000 and 30,000, the state of Uttar Pradesh hosting most of them, estimated by the Indian government to have 10,000 of those back then.

The majority of these schools follow the Hanafi school of thought. The religious establishment forms part of the mainly two large divisions within the country, namely the Deobandis, who dominate in numbers (of whom the Darul Uloom Deoband constitutes one of the biggest madrasas) and the Bareilvis, who also make up a sizeable portion (Sufi-oriented). Some notable establishments include: Aljamea-tus-Saifiyah (Isma'ilism), Al Jamiatul Ashrafia, Mubarakpur, Manzar Islam Bareilly, Jamia Nizamudina New Delhi, Jamia Nayeemia Muradabad which is one of the largest learning centres for the Bareilvis. The HR ministry of the government of India has recently declared that a Central Madrasa Board would be set up. This will enhance the education system of madrasas in India. Though the madrasas impart Quranic education mainly, efforts are on to include Mathematics, Computers and science in the curriculum.

Common Misconceptions

In the Arabic language, the word *madrasa* (مدرسة) means any educational institution, of any description, (as does the term *school* in American English) and does not imply a political or religious affiliation, not even one as broad as Islam in the general sense. Madrasas often have varied curricula. Some madrasas in India, for example, have a secularised identity. Although early madrasas were founded primarily to gain “knowledge of God” they also taught subjects such as mathematics and poetry. For example, in the Ottoman Empire, “Madrasahs had seven categories of sciences that were taught, such as: styles of writing, oral sciences like the Arabic language, grammar, rhetoric, and history and intellectual sciences, such as logic.”¹ This is similar to the Western world, in which universities began as institutions of the Catholic church.

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