

THE INDEPENDENT MADRASAS OF INDIA

Dar Al-'Ulum, Deoband and Nadvat Al-'Ulama, Lucknow

David Emmanuel Singh♦

1. Introduction

In recent years Madrasas have attracted immense attention in India, more so than Mosques and other endowed institutions of Indian Muslims. This has partly been on account of the general perception that fundamentalism,¹ Islamization,² and extremist violence stem from the Madrasas. The part played by 'Deobandism'³ in Pakistan and Afghanistan is perhaps responsible for this image of Madrasas in South Asia. Islamization in itself is not problematic. It becomes a problem when fundamentalism (and the intra and inter-religious fault-lines it accentuates) and violence (inter-faith conflicts leading to symbolic or actual suppression of diversity or bloodshed) come to be linked to the Madrasas.⁴

Madrasas of India do not form a single system. There are Shi'a Madrasas⁵ and Sunni Madrasas.⁶ The Sunni Madrasas themselves are

♦**Dr. David Emmanuel Singh**, holding a PhD from the University of Wales, UK, is currently Research Tutor at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, UK and is the editor of *Transformation*, an international journal of Paternoster and Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. His publications include *Sainthood and Revelatory Discourse* (2003) and the forthcoming *Jesus and the Cross: Reflections on the Cross from Islamic Contexts* (Paternoster/Regnum).

¹It is an ideology under-scoring the need to recover the traditional Islam.

²It is a process of establishing traditional beliefs and practices among ordinary Muslims.

³This is a philosophy purporting to be inspired by the premier Islamic seminary in South Asia, Dar al-'Ulum in Deoband, India. The so-called Deobandi Madrasas, located in Pakistan, control a system of education, which nurtures a single vision of Islam with a view to raising a cadre of activist-scholars with a mission to counter a perceived external threat to Islam in South Asia, not least in Afghanistan.

⁴The Godhra arson in Gujrat is said to have been led by Mulla Umerji, an alumnus of Deoband. He is said to have had a close link with Deoband in providing financial support to the families of those accused and imprisoned. See more in D. E. Singh, "Hindu-Muslim Violence in Gujrat," *Transformation* 20, 4 (October 2003), 206-216.

⁵Shi'ism is a major sect forming about 15% of Indian Muslims. Y. S. Sikand's interview with Maulana Sayyed Hamid ul-Hasan, principal, Jami'a Nazmia,

divisible into, at least, three different streams: Those that are endowment (*waqf*) board-run; the government of India keeps a close tab on such Madrasas, since their funding is controlled by boards acting under the government supervision. Although not managed centrally, ‘the Deobandi Madrasas’ are the largest independent group of Madrasas dotting the entire subcontinent; they are inspired by one of the premier traditional Muslim Seminary, Dar al-‘Ulum at Deoband in North India. A relatively smaller number of Madrasas are inspired and run along the line of Nadvat al-‘Ulama’ at Lucknow in North India. Both of the latter two types are managed independent of the Government.

In this article, I attempt to draw readers’ attention to two key independent Madrasas of North India, which are the chief models of Madrasa education in, at least, South Asia. Addressing the view that the hallmark of Madrasa education in India is essentially medievalist and separatist, I ask if this perception is not a trifle too simplistic. The fundamental argument is that even though these Madrasas are fully independent of *waqf* and government control, they are not hermetically sealed from the modern world and the challenges being faced by the wider Indian society. They have sought and continue to sincerely seek to be relevant.

2. Overview of Madrasas in India⁷

Indian civilization is ancient. It has been enriched, during this time, through the culture, language and religion of people-groups from different parts of the world. This plurality reflects also in India having had more than one system of education. Some of these systems go back thousands of years to the period of the Vedic *rishis* (sages) who taught that which they heard (*shruti*) and remembered (*smriti*).⁸ These *rishis* were also called *guru* (teacher) and the centres of learning, teacher’s estate (*gurukul*).⁹

Lucknow, a Shi‘i Madrasa has likely been published by *Qalandar*; this author has the text of this interview sent to him by email dated June 01, 2003.

⁶Sunnism is the mainstream Islamic sect which forms over 80% of Indian Muslims.

⁷See <http://hcilondon.net/studying-in-india/index.html>.

⁸These are the two means by which divine revelation is communicated in the Vedic Hinduism.

⁹See chapter 20 in Acharya Gandhipati Tulsi, *Transmutation of Personality through Preksha Meditation*, trans. R. K. Seth, elec. version by S. Sisodhiya, at <http://www.jainworld.com/preksha/tulsi/atptindex.htm>.

Students lived with the *guru* and focused mainly on the development of wisdom and not just on the accumulation of knowledge. Two major fields of education existed: knowledge of the material world (*vidya*) and knowledge of the spiritual world (*vrata*). These centres were meant exclusively for the elite, for the system of paying fees (*gurudakshina*) was widespread. Consequently, the poor (almost always of lower castes) were generally excluded from receiving education. Students normally spent 14 years in *gurukuls* pursuing wisdom, knowledge, character and skills suitable to their station in society. The system is known to have produced writers, scholars, philosophers, warriors, and rulers.

The origins of Buddhism can be traced back to the year 563 BCE when Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was born. Buddhism was a great leveller. It defined itself strictly in relation to Brahminism: abandoning Brahminic priesthood and rituals; possibility of all to attain the annihilation of soul (*nirvana*) or liberation (*moksha*), irrespective of one's ritual, economic and socio-political background. In Theravada system of Buddhism,¹⁰ denial of the existence of gods whose bodily representatives Brahmins claimed to be, separation between the *karma* and the *dharma* of one's caste, *moksha* through the 'eightfold path' alone, and adoption of the 'middle way' rejecting extreme asceticism and wealth, created the conditions for an unprecedented levelling of castes and, hence, made education common and accessible to all. Buddhism saw to the establishment of the great institutions of learning, connected to monasteries, such as the ones in Nalanda¹¹ and Vikramshila.¹² The University of Nalanda is known to have had an enrolment of over ten

¹⁰Theravada (doctrine of the elders) is inspired by Tipitaka, the oldest record of the Buddha's teachings; it is the predominant religion of Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. Theravadists number over 100 million worldwide. Theravada holds to the 4 Noble Truths, which are conducive to the awakening: awareness of suffering, desire as the cause of suffering, suffering as not permanent, the 8-fold path as means to the end of suffering.

¹¹Founded in the 5th Century CE, Nalanda was one of the World's most ancient universities; it lies in ruins about 62 kms from Bodhgaya and 90 kms from Patna, the capital of Bihar in India. Emperor Ashoka built many monasteries, temples, and Viharas here; see for pictures of its ruins at <http://www.kalavinka.org/pilgrimage/nalapics/nalapics.htm>.

¹²Remains of the ancient Vikramshila University were excavated at the village of Antichak in the Bhagalpur district of Bihar, India; King Dharampala founded the University. See more at <http://www.tourmyindia.com/states/bihar/vikramshila.html>.

thousand students, including a huge number of international students from the whole of Asia.¹³

The genesis of Madrasas in South Asia is attributable to the Delhi Sultanate (13th century CE). The original purpose of the Madrasa was to equip the youth for the administrative service of the Sultanate. Whether these Madrasas incorporated the then known scientific subjects as preserved and expounded by the illustrious philosophers and mystics remains to be fully answered. But, given the proximity of the early 13th century to the great philosophical, mystical, and scientific temperaments of Ibn Sina (370/980-429/1037),¹⁴ Ibn Rushd (520/1126-595/1198),¹⁵ Al-Ghazzali (d. 505/1111),¹⁶ Ibn ‘Arabi (560/1165-638/1240),¹⁷ and the masters of the Chishti and Naqshbandhi brotherhoods (of whom Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi [1564-1624] and Shah Waliullah Khan Dehlawi [1703-1762] are especially significant), it is improbable that the Muslim rulers would ever have ‘turned a blind eye’ to these legacies. Examples of attempts made to bypass the liberal philosophical and mystical traditions may be found, but no tradition within the Islam of Indian subcontinent, remains unaffected by these inputs. It is known that throughout the medieval period, there existed a rich interchange of knowledge between Indian and Islamic traditions across the fields of theology, religion, philosophy, arts, architecture, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. Madrasas, during these times, were centres of higher learning with Islam forming the dominant backdrop. Madrasas served as the centres of education from where came the lawyers, doctors, philosophers, poets, clerks, etc., who served the society at large.

Similar to the Muslim rulers’ policy of establishing Madrasas to equip administrative staff of government, Warren Hastings instituted a Madrasa in Calcutta (1781) to train government officers dealing with administering law among the Muslims. The Sanskrit Colleges of Banaras (1792) had a similar objective of equipping officials dealing with legal matters to do with Hindus. The motive was governance of Muslim and Hindu affairs in the absence of a unified code of law. These Madrasas

¹³See http://www.indian-embassy.dk/culture_welcome.htm.

¹⁴Ibn Sina is also called Avicenna and *al-shaykh al-ra’is*.

¹⁵Ibn Rushd is Averroes for the west.

¹⁶He is known as the greatest Muslim theologian, philosopher and mystic.

¹⁷He is known as the ‘greatest master of Sufism’.

differ from the later traditional Madrasas both on the scores of the purpose they served and the agencies responsible for their establishment.

The colonial expansion in the 19th century and the European missionary movement brought modern western education to India. The famous Hindu College was established in Calcutta in 1817. In 1834, the Elphinstone Institute was founded in Bombay. Several famous institutions of higher learning in Allahabad (Ewing Christian College), Kanpur (Christ Church College), Madras (Madras Christian College), Bombay (Wilson College), etc., came into existence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Calcutta, Chennai, and Bombay Universities were set up in 1857. Continuing the missionary enterprise in promoting western education, today, there are in India, over 226 universities and thousands of colleges affiliated to them, 428 engineering colleges and technological institutes, more than 100 medical colleges, scores of agricultural institutes and other professional colleges.¹⁸

Western education, which provided broader opportunities, gravely affected traditional Madrasa education. The job-market is inundated with graduates from modern western educational institutions. Since the decline and eventual cessation of Muslim rule in India, the graduates of Madrasas do not have job opportunities outside the *ummah*, apart from a handful of those who continue their studies in departments of Islamics, Arabic, Persian, or Urdu in some of the modern Indian universities. The more accomplished of these graduates from dual systems of education get absorbed in universities, the rest remain content with either teaching in the fast mushrooming Madrasas (Government or independent) or becoming leaders (*imams*) of the equally fast growing Mosques. The departments for *waqf* (endowment; pl. *awqaf*) affairs, however, were established to look into the management of Muslim properties. In India, the central *waqf* board and its state subsidiaries functioned and continue to function through government grants and individual donations.

The Islamic concept of charitable giving (*sadaqah*) is founded on three Qur'anic principles: the interpenetration of spiritual and material life, the nature and purpose of Muslim community (*ummah*) and the trusteeship

¹⁸These figures may vary as there is a spurt in the growth of new higher education institutions in India in the recent past, partially attributed to the influence of globalisation.

of wealth and property.¹⁹ God is the absolute sovereign. The Prophet, his successors, his *ummah* and the state are instruments of God. Charitable giving becomes institutionalized through almsgiving (*zakat*) – one of the five essentials of Islamic practice – and *awqaf*. *Waqf* literally means ‘to hold’ or ‘to confine’. This term is used in Islam in the sense of endowing and preserving something for the benefit of the needy among Muslims. It relates primarily to land and buildings (Mosques, Madrasas, and Hospitals) and, secondarily, to books, cattle, shares, stocks, and cash. The objective of *awqaf* is to meet needs, but it goes beyond mere service to the greater object of being near God.

It has been suggested that the *awqaf* are rooted to the very beginnings of Islam. The Ka‘bah in Mecca, for instance, was entrusted to believers for not just the worship of God, but also to offer to ‘the outsiders’ the invitation to worship the One God. The mosque in Madina, built after the flight of Muslims (*hijra*) there, is said to be the second earliest example of the *waqf*. The two basic characteristics of *waqf* are: ‘perpetuity’ and ‘permanence’. This means that the nature and purpose for which the property is originally endowed, in principle, remains unaltered. Thus, Mosques provide a place for communal ritual worship of God, hospitals for the care of the sick and the Madrasas for the education of the children, irrespective of their social, ethnic, and economic background and the vagaries of politics. Historically, rulers of India – Muslims, British, and Socialist-Secular-Democratic, and Hindu-Secular – have sought to maintain the principles of perpetuity and permanence despite rapid political changes.

Over the last few decades there has been an increasing polarization between mainstream Muslims and Hindus. The phenomenal growth and popularity of the Hindu cultural organizations, on the one hand, and the political success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, a Hindu political party) is said to be gradually affecting the manner in which *waqf* has functioned in the past. The most populous state of India, Uttar Pradesh (UP), contains the largest number of Madrasas in the country. In the last decade, UP has witnessed a quick rise to power of the ritually ‘lower’ castes represented by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The BSP has remained in power largely through a strategic alliance with the mainly high caste Hindu party, the BJP.

¹⁹See pages 7 ff. at <http://www.amila.org/education/RetreatReadings2002.pdf>; see also Mawlana W. Khan’s paper on charity on pages 12-16 and the roots of charity in the Qur’an and the Hadith on pages 2-11.

In the middle of the last decade, the government of Uttar Pradesh (UP)²⁰ decided to apply the grant-in-aid scheme to nearly 135 Madrasas. Approximately, \$2000000 were set aside as the aid budget for these Madrasas. This number was subsequently reduced to 68, alarming Muslims throughout India. The teachers' association of the Madrasas in UP openly condemned this decision.²¹ In some areas of North India, Government holds a large number of *waqf* properties on behalf of Muslims. One of the allegations against the government has been that these properties have been leased out or, in some cases, due to consistent neglect the properties have been encroached upon by squatters or builders. For instance, the *waqf* board of Delhi has reportedly asked the Welfare Ministry to release 123 properties of the *waqf* to the board so that it can establish Madrasas and other welfare institutions for Muslims.²²

In light of some such problems associated with the management of *waqf* properties and boards, the tenth *fiqh Seminar*, among others, made the following observations:²³ *Awqaf* are to be held in perpetuity. Muslims of India and government are responsible for their protection and development; sale or transfer of any *awqaf* is abhorrent. Mosques command greater sanctity than other *awqaf* and, therefore, its sale is absolutely prohibited even when it lies unused (i.e., even if the *namaz* is not performed there); even Mosques protected by archaeological department must be open for *namaz*; partition caused a great mass exodus of Muslims from India. Many Mosques, Madrasas, and other properties were simply left behind. Local Muslims and *waqf* boards have the responsibility to protect and maintain these; and the surplus *waqf* land endowed to Mosques can be used to establish Madrasas with appropriate provisions.

The widely current opinion of Madrasas being grounds for encouraging separatism based on Islam's fixation with the past has its genesis in 'Sepoy Mutiny' (1857). Ironically, the general Indian perception

²⁰The most populous northern state of India with the maximum number of Muslims in India and, hence, the endowed institutions.

²¹A. B. Masoud, "Madrasa Association Flays UP Government Decision," *Islamic Voice* 11-05, 124 (May 1997), at <http://www.islamicvoice.com/>.

²²A. Akhter, "Release of Wakf Properties Demanded," *Islamic Voice* 12-07, 139 (July 1998), at <http://www.islamicvoice.com/>.

²³24-27 October 1997, Haj House, Mumbai; see fuller report at <http://ifa-india.org/101th.htm>.

of this uprising was and continues to be that it was a ‘war of independence’ against the British. This perception was due to the fact that it identified in the British a common enemy who had to be evicted. The ailing Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Jafar, was widely acclaimed, at this point of time, as the ruler of India. The ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ did not obviously succeed. It succeeded, however, in hardening the attitudes of the British against Indians, not least Muslims. The ‘Mutiny’ also marked the beginning of the transference of India from being a Company territory to being subject to the Crown and with it a new sense of urgency to ‘teach’ the natives in the way of the West.

The aftermath of the ‘Mutiny’ brought a realization of an immensely humiliating final defeat to the hundreds of years’ long Muslim rule and civilization in India, but also witnessed an increasing polarization between the elite Muslims and Hindus. The common enemy, the British having left, Madrasas today are increasingly suspected of engendering pan-Islamic and anti-India (Hindu) sentiments.

Two principal routes of recovery of the lost empire were conceived by the Muslim elite in the immediate aftermath of 1857: firstly, alliance with the British and the revitalization of Muslims through western-scientific education; secondly, revitalization of Muslims through traditional Islamic education. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98), a famous Indian Muslim ancestrally connected with the Mughal court, is well-known for his alliance with the British, and his views against the futility of rebellion. After the ‘mutiny’ he actively sought the revitalization of Muslims through western-scientific education. The Muslim Anglo-Oriental College he established later became the Aligarh Muslim University.²⁴ The College/University played a central role in the subsequent Indian politics.

Since, the *waqf* controlled other Muslims, being fearful of the decline of Muslim prestige, power, and civilization, led the counter ‘Madrasa Movement’ which sought to establish Islamic schools where the Arabic-Persian legacy as well as Islamic sciences, faith, and the way of life could be safeguarded. This was seen as the way by which Muslims in India could be revitalized. These were Madrasas that remained independent from the government controlled endowed Madrasas. Dar al-‘Ulum, Deoband (1866) and Nadwat al-‘Ulama’, Lucknow (1893) are two chief examples of the several other similar traditional schools in India established in the

²⁴See J. M. S. Baljon, *Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1949.

latter part of the 19th century.²⁵ Today, there is an explosion of Madrasas inspired by the Deobandi model throughout Asia.

The belief that these Madrasas have been fixated with the past needs, however, has to be revisited.

3. Dar al-'Ulum, Nadwat al-'Ulama': *Establishment of Nadwat al-'Ulama'*

The Nadva was established with a view to provide a balanced synthesis of the classical and the modern. The concern was to seek ways in which Muslims can learn to integrate the revealed fundamentals and the ever transforming world of modern knowledge. The Nadwat al-'Ulama' ('Nadva', in short) attributes the need for traditional Madrasas to 'the political ascendancy of the west'. The west with its emphasis on materialist and liberal secular values is perceived to have caused fissures within Islam, dividing Muslims into 'the modernists' and 'the orthodox'. The modernists uncritically adopted the western system of education, whereas the orthodox reasserted reliance on the infallibility of the way of life and thought of the 'Ulama' of the past.

In this context of conflict within Islam, Maulana Muhammad 'Ali Mungeri, a pupil of Mawlana Lutfullah Sahib of Aligarh and the spiritual successor (*khalifa*) of Shah Fazlur Rahman of Muradabad²⁶ emerged as the leader of a group of scholars following the tradition of the great 18th century reformer, scholar, and Sufi, Shah Waliullah Dehlawi.

This group of scholars laid the foundations of the Nadva aiming mainly to promote harmony among Muslims. It was believed that progress was only possible when Muslims united on a single vision of religion and its goals; with this agreement in place, Muslims themselves would be able to determine the extent of educational reform and improvements in the dated syllabi of the Arabic Madrasas.²⁷ The foundations of the Nadva were laid in the city of Cawnpore (Kanpur) in 1893 with Mawlana Lutfullah Sahib as its president. The Nadva had the following main objectives:

²⁵For example, Mazahar al-'Ulum, Saharanpur (1866), Madrasa Baqyatrish Salihat, Vellore (1883), Mazahar al-'Ulum, Banares (1893), Madrasa Aminia, Delhi (1897) and Dar al-'Ulum Khalilia, Tonk (1899), Madrasa al-Islah Azamgarh (1909), etc.

²⁶All these hail from the state of present Uttar Pradesh.

²⁷The Arabic Madrasas of the 19th century followed a dated syllabus on Islamic studies.

Reformulating the Madrasa syllabi taking into account the changed conditions of modern life, addressing the problems and questions of modern life by recourse to scriptures – the Qur’an and the Hadith, establishing a modern library aiding the study and research on Islam, propagating Islam through the writing and publication of literature, and equipping preachers to possess a sound knowledge of the scriptures and the world.

There is nothing here that suggests a simplistic obscurantist and medievalist Muslim agenda. Almost all of the mainstream Christian theological institutions can identify with the desire of a civilization on the decline to re-conceive itself along the lines suggested by these objectives. Initially, the Nadva functioned merely as an association of scholars who gathered in different town from time to time to discuss matter of importance to Muslims in the modern context. In order, however, to fully realize the objectives, the Nadva established a permanent school in 1898 at the very heart of the Islamic culture of the time, Lucknow.

The Nadva leadership draws its inspiration from the great eclectic Indian Sufi traditions. It, therefore, seeks to balance commitment to traditional faith with scholarship and the open-minded tolerant attitude of the Sufis. The leaders represented distinguished families and were widely recognized for their wisdom and scholarship. Mawlana Muhammad ‘Ali Mungheri, the president of the association of the Nadva was appointed as the first General Secretary (*nazim*), an honorary position in the school. He was succeeded by Mawlana Masihuzzaman Khan, a resident of Shahjahanpur near Lucknow and the teacher of the former Nizam of Hyderabad. Mawlana Khalilur Rahman from Saharanpur, Mawlana Syed ‘Abdul Hai, Mawlana Syed ‘Abdul ‘Ali and Mawlana Syed ‘Abdul Hasan ‘Ali Nadvi (1914-1999) followed him as the General Secretaries of the Nadva. Mawlana Nadvi was one of the most respected Muslim scholars of the 20th century India. Following the footsteps of Shibli Numani,²⁸ he became Principal of the Nadva in addition to being General Secretary. He is remembered both in the Muslim world and in the west as a distinguished scholar, preacher, reformer, and educationist and for his contributions to interfaith harmony.²⁹

²⁸Shibli Numani (1857-1914) was a Lawyer, poet, historian, teacher, and nationalist from Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh.

²⁹His eclecticism is manifest from the fact that he was associated with the Chishti, Suhrawardi, and Naqshbandi brotherhoods of Sufism. He served as a

4. Study and Research Programs

The school was founded with the understanding that change was an essential ingredient for the success of Muslims in modern India. This necessity to change, however, did not involve dilution of the traditional, but affirmation of the dynamic nature of the faith. One of the changes the Nadva brought about into its system of education involved the removal of subjects from medieval period whose relevance today is hard to establish. This includes the dated traditional scholastic sciences which are irrelevant today due to the absence of the sects and disputes which gave rise to those sources. The Nadva included, in their lieu, the study of modern sciences and languages in its curriculum.

The Nadva study ranges from the primary to the university level. The total number of years required to go through this system of education is sixteen years. The Nadva today has a total of 4000 students located in the main centre in Lucknow and its branches. Students do not normally pay for boarding, lodging, and study. Approximately, one third of its students receive monthly stipends ranging from Rs. 25 to 100. The academic year begins from *shawwal* (October/November) and ends in *sha'aban* (December/January). The Nadva has today over hundred tutors.

The primary stage (6 years) includes the teaching of Urdu, Hindi, English, arithmetic, geography, and other sciences. This period of study includes subjects taught in the parallel secular system of education in India. This level consists of over 2000 students. During this period, those students who show an inclination about committing the entire Qur'an to memory are given special additional tuition. Approximately, 200 students take this as an elective.

member of the Deoband and was singularly responsible for the establishment of the Academy of Islamic Research and Publications at Lucknow. He was a productive writer. His works are prescribed as textbooks in several Arab universities. He also served as a visiting professor in a number of Arab universities. He served on the Higher Council of the Islamic University, Medina, the Executive Committee of the Federation of Islamic Universities, Rabat, and was Chairman of the Board of the Centre of Islamic Studies, Oxford. See for a good review of his contributions, Yoginder Sikand, "Islam and the Muslim Minority Predicament: Reflections on the Contributions of Sayyed Abul Ali Nadwi," *Qalander*, <http://www.islaminterfaith.org/aug2002/article.html>, http://www.dartmouth.edu/~alnur/ISLAM/GRMUSLIMS/Ali_Nadwi.htm, <http://www.rauf96.supanet.com/syed.htm> and <http://www.nadwi.net/e/introdata.htm>.

The secondary stage consists of a 3 year program after the primary stage. In this level, in addition to learning English, students also learn Persian and Arabic grammar, composition and literature. The higher secondary state consists of 2 years of study (corresponding to the high school of the parallel system of education). During this stage, students are taught Arabic, Persian, and English languages in addition to the religious sciences and Islamic history. The graduation ('*alimiyat*) stage is a 4 year long program. This parallels the intermediate and degree program of the secular system of education. During this period, students study the commentaries of the Qur'an, traditions, jurisprudence, literature, etc. At this stage, students also acquire higher knowledge of English equivalent to the intermediate level of the secular education.

Post-graduate stage (*fazilat*) is a 2 year long program after '*alimiyat*. During this stage students are instructed in advanced Arabic literature and other traditional sciences consisting of the commentaries, traditions, jurisprudence and Shari'ah. At this point, students are also required to submit their master's thesis on a subject of their choice. During this period they also do a course on comparative religions. The number of students at this level is small compared to the other stages of study. Selected students go on to study up to doctoral research (*takmil*). The normal duration of such researches is 2 years full time work under a supervisor from the Nadva.

In addition to these regular programs, the Nadva also offers special courses. A 5 year condensed course in Arabic and theology who have previously received an intermediate or a bachelor's degree from a recognized university in first or second division. This program entitles them to a degree of '*alim*. Those students whose mother tongue is English are taught in English. The Nadva houses a Department of Islamic Thought and Comparative Religions for those who wish to major in these fields. In addition to these, the Institute of Teachers Training at the Nadva offers a special teachers' training program to those who wish to go into teaching. Many of the Nadva graduates have gone on to study and teach in western, Arab and South East Asian universities. The Nadva receives students from the whole of the Muslim world.

The Nadva library houses over 100000 books. Several research institutions set up by the Nadva promote ongoing research and publication. Its monthly and fortnightly journals are called *al-b'aas-al-islami* and *al-raid*. Its Urdu fortnightly is called *tameer-e-hayat*. The Majils-i-Tahqiqat-o-Nashriyat-i-Islam (The academy of Islamic research and Publication) is

one particular institute which was started by Mawlana Syed ‘Abul Hasan ‘Ali Nadvi in 1959. This academy has so far produced over 200 works, some of which have been translated into many languages. The Nadva was instrumental in the genesis of the Majlis-i-Tahqiqat-i-Shariah (The Academy of Research in the Shari‘ah), which was set up to study, review, and adapt the Muslim Personal Law (part of the traditional Shari‘ah law which addresses the family and inheritance of Muslims in India) and Islamic Shari‘ah in general. This academy was founded over a decade ago under the leadership of Mawlana Syed ‘Abul Hasan ‘Ali Nadvi. The members of this academy are drawn from all over the vast country of India.

Through all of these additional efforts, the Nadva seeks to bridge the gap between the religious scholars (from the old school of thought) and modern Muslims. Its character is revolutionary in that it calls for reform of Islam recognizing the changing currents operating within Islam and in wider society.

5. Dar al-‘Ulum, Deoband: Origins

Dar al-‘Ulum is located at a small town called Deoband, approximately 5-6 hours drive from Delhi. It is the oldest (of the new type) and the best known of the Madrasas of India. Next to Al-Azhar in Cairo, Dar al-‘Ulum is considered the most important centre of Islamic learning in the world. Majority of the independent Madrasas in India, as also in the other parts of South Asia, are modelled on it and follow the curriculum set by it. It has, since its origins in the 19th century played a significant role not just in training and equipping highly qualified leaders, but has played a central role in nation building, not least of which was the Indian freedom movement.

Mawlana Burhanuddin Qasmi’s work³⁰ shows that Dar al-‘Ulum represents the very quintessence of the perfect balance between the formal and spiritual currents within Islam. Its spiritual component is rooted in the legacy of a well-known Sufi reformer Shah Waliullah Dehlwi (1703-1762) and, hence, goes back over 100 years before its foundations were laid in Deoband. Shah Waliullah was ahead of his time. He led an intellectual campaign years before the ‘first war of independence’ and the ‘Quit India Movement’ and drew the attention of those who would hear him to the

³⁰Burhanuddin Qasmi, *Darul Uloom Deoband: A Heroic Struggle against the British Tyranny*, Mumbai: Markazul Ma’arif, n.d.

extensive moral and spiritual corruption of the company and the values of the West, the East India Company represented. His basis for the critique of the Company and its values essentially stemmed from the spiritual experience he is said to have had while on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The hallmark of his message was the commitment to establishing equality and justice in India – objects widely perceived to be lacking in British India then as also during the period when Dar al-‘Ulum became a participant in the freedom movement. His son, Shah ‘Abdul Aziz Dehlwi, continued his critique of the British rule at the beginning of the 19th century and began a long drawn Indian struggle for freedom in which the spiritually inclined ‘Ulama’ provided significant leadership. The ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ led to the death of over 50000 ‘Ulama’, and in Delhi alone nearly 500 of them were hanged. So actively were these engaged in the freedom movement that the ‘Ulama’, known popularly as the *mawlawis*, became synonymous with the term ‘rebel’.

It was in the aftermath of this tragic state of affairs (apparently, it took years for the ‘Ulama’ to recover from the shock of the policy of ‘Ulama’ hunting’), that the Dar al-‘Ulum came into existence. The original objective of this institution was to establish a spiritual and intellectual base for revolution against what was generally perceived by this group of the elite as injustice, oppression, suppression of culture, knowledge, and endowments.

The early impetus for the establishment of this Madrasa was provided by a Sufi, Haji Muhammad Abid of Deoband. He was appointed as the honorary patron and manager of the Madrasa when it was first established. Maulana Muhammad Yaqub, a leading educationist, was the first headmaster of the Madrasa. Hazrat Mawlana Muhammad Qasim Nanatawi (1833-1879) and Hazrat Maulana Rasheed Ahmed Gangohi are recognized as the two principal founding fathers. The three components of the Madrasa’s objective were: central role of religion in individual and social life, freedom from slavery within and without, simplicity, and hard work.³¹

The Dar al-‘Ulum began small and in utter simplicity at an open mosque in Deoband on 30 May 1866. This was reminiscent of the earliest period of genesis of Islam in Madina. The first teacher to be appointed was a spiritual leader, Mullah Mahmud Deobandi. The school had a single

³¹It is interesting to note how close Gandhi’s own philosophy of life, in the early 20th century, involved some of these principal objectives.

student named Mahmud al-Hasan. This student who later came to be known as *shaykh al-hind* (leader of India) led a resistance movement that cut across the Hindu-Muslim divide. He formed a government in exile headquartered in Madina with Mahmud al-Hasan as its *amir* (chief), Barkutullah Bhopali as its minister, and Mahraja Pratap Singh as its President. This government in exile began then to seek international support against the British rule. One of the internal communications between these leaders was written on a silk cloth giving details of the conspiracy against the British. This letter fell into the hands of the British in 1916 and gave rise to the well-known *tahrik-e-reshmi rumal* (the silk kerchief conspiracy). Over 200 'Ulama' were arrested as a result (many of whom later released). Muslims, related to this Madarasa, continued to participate in various other movements led by the Indian National Congress (established in 1885), such as the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements.

The Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, a Muslim organization based in India, was started in 1919 by the 'Ulama' of this Madrasa. Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, a well-known freedom fighter and a product of Madrasa education, along with the Indian National Congress, played an important role in the freedom of India. This Madrasa inspired organization opposed the two nation theory of the Muslim league on grounds that culture, not religion, defines a nation's identity. A split occurred, however, in 1937, and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam came into existence. After the partition it came to be in Pakistan. Though the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind claims to represent all Indian Muslims, majority of its members are from Dar al-'Ulum, Deoband.

This Dar al-'Ulum in Deoband is known today as 'the Al-Azhar' and 'the mother of all religious institutions' in India. It seeks to combine the divergent intellectual and spiritual streams within Islam with the selected items from the modern western system in order to equip generations of Muslim leaders in India.

6. System of Education

In reaction to the introduction and wholly uncritical adoption of modern western education, Dar al-'Ulum laid its special emphasis on traditional subjects. It, however, also absorbed some of the features from the modern institutions such as the division of students in classes, attendance registers, written examinations, etc. Its open attitude is attributable to the moderate foundations on which it is said to be based. Of these foundations, the

following are significant: The knowledge of the *shari'ah* (law) and conformity to the *sunnat* (traditions),³² the following of the Sufi path, the moderate vision of religious Law (Hanafi school),³³ and theology (Maturidi school).³⁴

During the time of the Prophet, the primary 'text' of education was the Holy Qur'an (then, in its extant oral form). The sources of knowledge expanded to include the traditions of the Prophet during the period of the early Caliphate when the Qur'an also came to be written. To these were added the expanding science of jurisprudence and to some degree, also poetry as Muslim communities spilled beyond the confines of Arabia. 400 years on, newer subjects of learning were added which included the science of Qur'anic interpretation, principles of jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, lexicon, and history. With Islam's encounter with Greco-Persian cultures, newer sciences of medicine, astrology, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, etc., were also introduced. By the turn of the 11th century, scholastic theology and philosophical mysticism came to be firmly established as necessary components of Islamic education.

According to Maulana Hakim Sayyid Abdul-Hayy Lakhnavi, the education history of Islam can be divided into four distinct periods.

The first period begins roughly in the 12th century and ends in the 14th century. The following subjects were considered mandatory as part of Islamic learning: grammar, literature, philosophy-logic, jurisprudence, scholastic theology, Sufism, science of interpretation, and Hadith. The study of jurisprudence was considered the highest level of learning, since it was especially useful in sorting legal problems of the court and commoners alike. The second period begins from the late 14th century to the early 16th century. Apart from other sources, the study of the Hadith acquired a special place in the curricula during this period. The third period begins from the start of the Mughal era. During the reign of the Emperor Akbar, owing to the eclectic attitude of the Emperor, several

³²These traditions are understood in their broadest sense in order to include both the inner and external dimensions, a legacy of the high-mindedness of Sufi's brotherhoods.

³³Four traditional schools of law are: Hanafi (eponymous founder, Abu Hanifa, c.700-767 from Iraq), Maliki (Malik Ibn Anas, c.715-795 from Medina), Shafi'i (Muhammad Ibn Idris ash-Shafi'I, 767-820), Hanbali (Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, 780-855). Both Moghul and Ottoman empires were officially subscribed to the liberal Hanafi school.

³⁴Al-Maturidi followed the liberal Abu Hanifa's legacy in theology.

newer additions were made to the syllabi. This period of eclecticism continued through to the time of the great reformer and mystic, Shah Waliullah of Delhi. Mughal Empire's special relations with Persia lent a Persian flavour to Indian culture and learning. Philosophy in particular of the mystical sort came to be recognized as the queen of sciences and was expressed through poetry.

The fourth period began from the middle of the 18th century with the efforts of Mulla Nizamuddin Sahalvi, a contemporary of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi. During the latter part of the Mughal era, the centre of learning and culture shifted from Delhi to Lucknow,³⁵ culminating in the liberal tradition of combining learning with Sufism of the 'Ulama' of the famous Farangi Mahal.³⁶ Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) is said to have visited Lucknow and ordered the construction of the mosque on Lakshaman Tila (a Hindu religious site).³⁷ Aurangzeb also transferred a complex of four buildings (originally belonging to a French [farangi] trader) called Farangi Mahal to Mullah Nizamuddin. Mullah Nizamuddin founded a famous school which produced several important scholars famously known as "the 'Ulama' of Farangi Mahal." The curriculum adopted by the school was named as 'Nizami's Syllabus' (*dars-e nizami*). The main feature of this curriculum was that it was rationalistic.

Dar al-'Ulum follows this syllabus in spirit, as it brings together the excellence of all of the previous centres of learning and their syllabi in addition to the changes demanded by the new situations and times; in this sense Dar al-'Ulum claims to be more comprehensive.

Its syllabus consists of four levels: primary, intermediate, graduate, and post-graduate. Primary to graduate level program is mandatory and takes 8 years to complete. The post-graduate program is not mandatory. It includes the biography of Muhammad, grammar, syntax, Arabic literature,

³⁵Lucknow (capital of Avadh) is known to have been an important centre of the Sultanate of Delhi in the 14-15th centuries and continued into the Mughal Empire from the early 16th century. With the decline of the Mughal Empire, a succession of 11 governors ruled over Avadh until 1858. The British took over the administration after Navab Wajid Ali Shah (1847-1856) in 1858.

³⁶See F. Robinson, *The 'Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.

³⁷Shaikh Pir Muhammad, a contemporary scholar and Sufi, lies buried here. During his stay here, he attracted large numbers of student and scholars from different part of the country. The school founded by him was an important centre of learning for about a century after his death in 1668/69.

chirography (writing and dictation), jurisprudence, logic, exegesis, Hadith (Traditions), ethics and moral law, general history, rhetoric, modern sciences, geography, systematic theology, history of India, and Urdu language. The optional post-graduate degree offers specialised training in the fields of the science of interpretation/hermeneutics, theology, jurisprudence, literature (Arabic/Persian/Urdu), teaching methods, calligraphy, journalism, computer science, English literature, and missions

8. Bridging the Chasms between Madrasas and Secular Institutions

Waris Mazhari, recently interviewed by Y. S. Sikand,³⁸ is perhaps the principal example of the highly educated Muslims of South Asia who, in themselves, bring together not just the Nadva and Deobandi systems but also span the supposed gulf between the so-called secular and traditional systems of education. His views are representative of the host of alumni of the Dar al-‘Ulum, Deoband since the Urdu monthly *tarjuman al-Qur’an* he edits is an official organ of the Deoband Madrasa Old boys Association in Delhi.

The Deoband Madrasa Old boys Association is an apolitical organization of the graduates of Deoband concerned with Dar al-‘Ulum’s vision to Islamize the Muslim masses and promote harmony between the different factions within Islam and the wider society.³⁹ It aims to assist the Madrasas, on a continuing basis, in reforming the syllabus consonant with the changing times and needs.⁴⁰ Mazhari agrees that conservative ‘Ulama’ resist change largely on account of their respect for past authorities. He thinks of this as nothing short of ‘the veneration of the elders’. This is precisely the reason why Muslims should not remain bound to the past authorities. He believes that the great majority of the ‘Ulama’, both in and outside the Deobandi Madrasa system, favour change and modernization without sacrificing the essentials of faith. He believes the major obstacle on the road to further change in Madrasas is not the resistance of some traditional ‘Ulama’, but rather the paucity of funds.⁴¹

In response to Y. S. Sikand’s question on the role of Madrasas in aiding and abetting violence, Mazhar makes a distinction between the

³⁸My source of the copy of Y. S. Sikand’s interview with Waris Mazhari, 20th January, 2003 sent to me by the Interviewer; see the published version of Y. S. Sikand’s interview in *Qalandar*, August 2003.

³⁹Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 1.

⁴⁰Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 2.

⁴¹Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 7.

Madrasas of India and Pakistan. He believes some Madrasas of Pakistan do justify violence; although, this view does not appear to be entirely correct, he shows no awareness of the same happening in any of the Indian Madrasas. Consistent to the history of the Partition Movement, he believes that Dar al-'Ulum at Deoband, in particular, has been in the forefront of Indian nationalism and continues to remain bound by the vision of a pluralistic India. He believes that this philosophy characterizes the present Deoband Madrasa and the host of institutions inspired by it.⁴²

9. Conclusion

Modernization is understood primarily in relation to the need for modern subjects in Madrasas – not just for their own sake, but also in order to further understand deeper implications of the Qur'an. A deeper study of history of the wider world, for instance, is one such area of improvement. Likewise, the study of social sciences, Hindi (national language of India), English (the language of the world), etc., is necessary in order that the graduates feel at home in the world they live in and interact with. At the primary and intermediate levels, the pupils need to be exposed to key subjects taught in the alternative systems of education.⁴³

Modernization is also understood in terms of promoting employment-oriented programs. These are programs through which the pupils are given technical and professional training, along with religious, in order to enable them maintain themselves and their families. Some Madrasas, following Deoband and the Nadva, do teach computers, journalism, etc., and provide technical training in watch repairing, book binding, and calligraphy⁴⁴ in addition to requiring students to engage in social and community development related projects while in training.⁴⁵

Though still a long way to go, the Madrasas instituted with a view to providing education to Muslims girls are beginning to make a significant impact among Muslim women.⁴⁶

Mazhar also critiques the emphasis on rote learning in Madrasas. He believes that more changes need to be brought in to promote critical

⁴²Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 15.

⁴³Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 8.

⁴⁴Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 9.

⁴⁵Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 10.

⁴⁶Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 13.

thinking, comprehension, and debate in addition to inducting and fully integrating the available modern teaching methods.⁴⁷

Mazhar bemoans the fact that the ‘Ulama’ are not doing enough to promote inter-faith harmony in India. The challenge to preserve peace, however, is too great to be achieved simply by the ‘Ulama’ alone. He believes common Muslims need to participate in a wider Islamic movement for dialogue and peace.⁴⁸ Besides this, there is also a need to maintain peace between different sects within Islam. Dar al-‘Ulum, as the premier Muslim institution in India, he believes, will provide a strong leadership in these areas.⁴⁹

Do we have hard evidence of Dar al-‘Ulum or the Nadva providing leadership in defusing Hindu-Muslim tensions, particularly during times of active violence? It is difficult to give any firm answer to this question, but one can take heart in the fact that Muslim leadership is rising to the occasion and is seeking to commit itself to the great Deobandi tradition of Indian nationalism, recognition of plurality, and pursuit of inter- and intra-religious peace. The leadership is also concerned about making its system of education relevant to modern times. We hope not just that this movement of change continues, but also that, in time, a host of Madrasas inspired by it follows suit.

⁴⁷Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 14.

⁴⁸Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 20.

⁴⁹Interview with Waris Mazhari, *Qalandar* August 2003, Question 21.