

**The Rational Believer: Choices and Decisions in  
Madrasas of Pakistan**, by Masooda Bano, New Delhi: Foundation  
Books (South Asia Edition), 2013, pp. 264, INR 795

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*The Rational Believer* is a result of three years of research and field trips in Pakistan by the author and examines the post-9/11 image of madrasas in Pakistan. The findings are correlated with socio-economic theories and explain the logic of the teachings of Quran, where appropriate. Analyses of what makes a believer endure hardships, why jihadis attack fellow Muslims and what makes them martyrs (*shuhada*) are also carried out.

Going back to the twelfth century, the author compares the growth of colleges in Oxford (later grouped as a university) and madrasas in South Asia as centres of religious learning. While Oxford did start out as centre of Christian studies, it encouraged secular subjects, accepted centralized governance and prepared students for jobs created by the Industrial Revolution. By the nineteenth century, it became a symbol of world-class education.

During the same period, madrasas emerged as centres of Islamic education in South Asia, especially India. This was due to conversion of the locals to Islam by Sufis (who had migrated to India in the early eighth century) and the establishment of Muslim rule. Though following

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different religious thoughts (for example, Deobandi), they enjoyed patronage of the rulers. The teachers (ulema) imparted education based on the Quranic concepts adopting own syllabus and tradition, with the aim 'to make their men Muslims and their community Islamic'. *Alims* (qualified students) were appointed courtiers, and the ulemas and maulvis became advisors on religious matters. Madrasas were generally funded by local or state donations and managed by the ulemas. The ulemas had an impact on daily life of their followers as they interpreted religion for them, answered their many unknown beliefs and issued fatwas.

Institutions like the Muizzi Madrasa, Delhi; Farangi Mahal, Lucknow; and Dar-ul-Uloom at Deoband (Uttar Pradesh) became famous. Students (*alim*) completing their education were awarded *ijaza* (certificate). In a few madrasas, along with religious texts, Hadith (traditions of the Prophet), subjects like philosophy, medicine, logic, law and astronomy were also covered.

Their growth saw a decline under the colonial rule and the emphasis shifted back to religious education. However, visionaries like Sir Syed Ahmed realized the importance of secular education and, in 1875, he established an educational institution at Aligarh (now Aligarh Muslim University). Also, states like Bengal (including areas now in Bangladesh) formed governing bodies for madrasas as early as 1927 and encouraged reforms.

After Partition in 1947, the focus in India shifted to secular education, and madrasas came under the Ministry of Minority Affairs at the Centre. As there were very few trained ulemas in areas forming Pakistan, the ulema of Deoband encouraged their *alims* to shift to Karachi, which has since grown as a hub of this theology.

In Bangladesh, reforms have succeeded well in the last three decades. Nearly 9,000 alias (reformed) madrasas have come up. In Pakistan, the change has been slow and there has been continued emphasis on religious education. Till 1962, a madrasa graduate was classified as an 'illiterate' and was excluded from the first election process. Later, especially during General Zia's rule, madrasas and Islamic religious education got a major boost. However, following 9/11 and General Musharraf's decision to join the United States (US)-led war on terror, these reforms are again facing fresh scrutiny.

The author also explores the reasons for non-utilization of grant of US\$ 225 million given by the Bush administration in 2002 for modernizing madrasa education (nearly \$ 71 million remains unutilized,

according to the book) and seeks to explain why madrasas resist a switch to secular education (by 2009, only 250 madrasas out of 16,000 had accepted to do so).

In 2007, the literacy rate of Pakistan was 57 per cent (69 per cent male and 45 per cent female) and 67 per cent of the population lived in rural areas. Nearly 70 million (60.3 per cent) of the population lived below poverty line: 40 million in urban areas and 30 million in rural areas. There were 16,000 madrasas registered with the five *wafaqs* (theological thoughts): Deobandi, 9,500; Bareilvi, 4,500; Jamat-i-Islami, 1,000; Ahl-i-Hadith, 500; and Ahl-i-Shia, 500. There were also a large number of unregistered and unaffiliated madrasas, mostly in rural areas.

Though a few *wafaqs* have greater concentration in some areas, generally all theologies are spread across the country. The numbers highlight following of a particular thought, which enhances its importance, as do the prominent students produced by it—a field in which the Deobandi leads.

Over the years, the education in the madrasas has become secular and they have adopted a graded system. The elite madrasas offer PhD (Takhasusus), Level 4—Master's (Alimiya), Level 3—BA (Aliya), Level 2—Senior Secondary and Level 1—Ibtid'iyah-Hifz and basic Islamic education (mostly oral learning of Quran). All teach the Dars-i-Nizami, but use different books. Shia madrasas, especially those in cities, admit children after matriculation, as *hifz* (memorizing of Quran) is not in their syllabus.

Level 1 madrasas are mostly spread across the villages, while 80 per cent of higher-level madrasas (Aliya) are in urban areas, like Karachi. All are situated in or near a mosque. A student may start at Level 1 in a village, but may migrate to places offering Level 2 education. Those joining Level 2 normally study till Level 4. Education, boarding and lodging is free for male students, while female students contribute Rs 400 per month. All madrasas have a separate section for female students.

Parents select a madrasa keeping the proficiency of its *alim* in mind. The same criterion is applied by those making donations. *Alims* adopt strict adherence to religious and moral code, as the contributions made by the parents is their main source of income. Even affluent parents send their wards to madrasas, especially for *hifz*, as they feel it makes them better Muslims. Some send at least one child to a madrasa, so that at least one member of the family can recite Quran properly.

Female madrasas make up 20 per cent of the total. Parents from all strata of society send their daughters to madrasas and feel that it makes

them good homemakers. Normally, girls do not enrol for *hifz*, and join at Levels 2 or 3, after attending secular schools. Qualified students are invited to lead prayers, a matter of pride for their parents. While a few join secular schools or pursue advance studies even abroad, quite a few become teachers and open their own madrasas.

Donations to madrasas are voluntary and are influenced by the status enjoyed by the ulema. A few also get donations from abroad, while religious-minded officials assist in their smooth running. Madrasas in rural areas or congested localities may be in a room attached to a mosque, but those offering higher education have good campuses, with their libraries being a matter of pride for the ulema.

Exploring the linkage between material sacrifices and religious rewards, the author found that making such sacrifices is not limited to Islam, and the Quran encourages the believer to attempt to excel in this world and make the best of this world's pleasures, while dispensing some of his wealth and material comfort. This is reflected in five pillars of Islam: *tauheed* (belief in oneness of god); *namaz* (daily five-time prayers); *roza* (fasting); *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca); and *zakat* (Islamic alms), as well as jihad.

Analyzing the Red Mosque incident of 2006–07, Bano found that majority of female students of the madrasa, Jamia Hafsa, were from middle-class families and had a formal secular education background. Their agitation was not for a better life or future, but against the regime which was corrupt, inefficient and not in line with the teachings of Islam. They felt that General Musharraf was selling fellow Muslims to America under the garb of the war on terror. The 2006 drone attack on a madrasa in Bajour (in the tribal area), resulting in the death of 80 children, also fuelled militancy and inspired them. They were convinced that salvation of Pakistan rested in imposing Sharia. They drew strength from each other, followed the ulema and on 7 July 2007, faced the military with wooden sticks, and in this incident, more than 100 people were killed. Their sacrifices were praised by a large segment of society and resulted in increased demand for opening more Jamia Hafsa madrasas. Their struggle also motivated an *alim* of Swat Valley, Maulana Fazalullah, a madrasa fellow, to raise an army of 2,000 *shaheen* (eagle) fighters to avenge the incident.

Jihad in Pakistan is traced to the support given by General Zia-ul-Haq to the US-led war against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in Afghanistan. Trained by Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), with

support from Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Saudi Arabia, the jihadis camped in the tribal areas. After Afghanistan, they were diverted to India (Kashmir), for strategic rather than religious motives. Thus, till then, it was 'external jihad', that is, beyond the borders of Pakistan.

Jihad turned 'internal' when, after 9/11, under US pressure, the Pakistan Army started operating against these jihadi groups in her own tribal areas. In the public perception, those fighting cross-border were seen fighting for a religious cause and the latter is against religious bigotry—a cause for public concern.

Bano's research shows that while a few jihadis did have a madrasa background, there is no evidence of madrasas providing military training. Jihadi groups also have ideas of defensive (*daft*) and aggressive or reformatory (*akdami*) jihads. While the *akdami* required permission of the Muslim leader, the *daft* allows a believer to act on his own, when under siege.

Out of the 50 jihadis studied by her, five were madrasa educated, 60 per cent belonged to economically and socially affluent classes with education from regular schools and universities, and 30 per cent had even studied abroad. In the list of suspected missing jihadis with the officials, 20 per cent were from madrasas and 80 per cent had a non-madrasa background (including a software engineer, a businessman, an MBA, a hardware expert, a male nurse, a computer engineer and a taxi driver). Even Beitullah Mehsud, leader of the post-9/11 resistance in the tribal belt, was not a madrasa student.

Regarding the reasons for the youth for joining jihad, besides religion, 30 per cent of the respondents felt a sense of excitement and adventure was an additional mobilizing factor, a few joined because they could not excel in worldly pursuits and 10 per cent joined due to failure to achieve material prosperity. Islamic texts played an important role in developing the psychological courage to undertake jihad, as Quran states that the outcome is in the hands of god for those fighting for the cause of Islam, thus reducing fear. Not many were motivated by the promise of 70 *hoors* and virgins in heaven.

Once a person decided to be a jihadi, the selection to join a group was often guided by his sectarian theology, achievements of the group and guidance of his *alim*. Reputation of the group leader also played a critical part. For example, those from Ahl-i-Hadith school of thought were most likely to join Lashkar-i-Taiba, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Jamaat-i-Islami, and those with Deobandi School were mostly likely to go to the Jaish-e-Mohammad.

Most group leaders recommend avoiding extreme measures of violence like suicide attacks against fellow Muslims, but they felt they had no option against the Pakistan Army in Red Mosque or tribal areas, for which they blamed the state which was acting under US pressure.

The richness of the book lies in the 110 madrasas across the four provinces and eight districts which the author visited more than once, as well as her interactions with teachers, parents, students, donors and the 50 jihadis. She used modern techniques of research and developed tools for formulating questionnaire, and relates her findings in terms of modern socio-economic theories.

However, considering the access the author had in Pakistan, one wishes she had interviewed a larger number of jihadis (including their friends and families) and their leaders, members of the security forces (serving if possible), civil servants, political personalities, members of the media and the common man on the streets, which would have enriched her book. Also, while co-relation of socio-economic theories with jihad or religious theology is important, the contents could have been made brief and simpler, as not all readers are well versed with these theories.

The book will be useful to understand the present jihad in Pakistan and is recommended for libraries.