

Targeting Muslim Religious Schools

Indiscriminate targeting of madrasas will only alienate minorities further and harden extremist sympathies on both sides. Besides, efforts set in motion by several madrasas to adapt to the changing educational needs of Muslims may be severely hampered.

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Ever since the present BJP-led coalition assumed power at the centre, there has been a coincident spate of attacks on Muslim madrasas, mosques and dargahs, in various parts of the country. Top Hindutva leaders have issued statements alleging that the Pakistani secret service agency, ISI, has infiltrated into numerous madrasas all over the country, particularly in districts lying along the country's borders with Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. A detailed report issued by the Indian intelligence agencies, reproduced in the Mumbai-based monthly *Communalism Combat* (August 2000), claims that some of these madrasas are, in the name of providing religious education to Muslim children, actually serving as training grounds for ISI spies and anti-Indian 'terrorists'. The fear is expressed that in future the muftis, maulvis and imams in these Muslim religious schools may be replaced by what it calls 'highly fanatic agents of ISI', who might secretly work for the break-up of the country. In recent months, government agencies have started targeting madrasas in various parts of the country, ostensibly to combat the alleged ISI presence. According to the Delhi-based Urdu monthly *Islamic Movement* (August 2001), in May 2001, the government-

appointed ministerial group for the 'reform of internal security', headed by home minister Advani, released a 137-page report that recommends, among other things, a close scrutiny of madrasas, alleging that some of these could be used as centres of subversion by anti-Indian elements. The fear has been expressed that by preaching 'religious fundamentalism', they could thereby undermine inter-communal harmony and also endanger the country's security. Accordingly, several madrasas are now being regularly visited by the police, who are carefully monitoring their activities.

In Uttar Pradesh, home to the largest number of Muslims of India, hundreds of madrasas are said to be now under close watch. According to a recent report published by the Delhi-based Muslim fortnightly, *Milli Gazette* (August 1-15, 2001) a circular allegedly issued by the UP state government suggests that Hindutva elements are seriously preparing the ground for what the magazine calls a 'communal civil war' in the state. The circular (no ST/SSP32/2001/4140, May 2001) is signed by B B Bakhshi, SSP, Lucknow) has been issued to the state police as a guideline to keep a vigil on 'ISI activities'. The ISI, the circular is quoted as alleging, is 'leaving no stone unturned' to disrupt life in the state, and is 'luring' Muslim and Sikh

youth 'to involve them in subversive activities', besides fanning anti-Hindu sentiments. To counter this alleged ISI threat, the circular instructs that every SHO should 'prepare a register of Muslim and Sikh families living in his respective area'. In particular, a list of newly-constructed madrasas and mosques should be kept and they should be closely monitored.

Predictably, Muslim organisations have been quick to register their protest against the allegation thus levelled against the madrasas. *The Milli Gazette*, on its part, which sent a team to inspect several madrasas along the Nepal-India border accused of having been infiltrated by the ISI, reported that none of the dozen Muslim seminaries that the team visited had any association whatsoever with the ISI. Some of their students had not even heard the name of the dreaded Pakistani secret service agency. In not a single of these madrasas was any sort of physical instruction, leave alone military training, being imparted. Yet, several of them complained of being regularly visited and, sometimes, harassed by the police. The *Milli Gazette* report adds that these madrasas have no history at all of promoting Hindu-Muslim conflict. In fact, one of them has several Hindu students and teachers on its rolls, while another one has several regular Hindu donors ('Nepal-Border Madrasas: No Iota of 'Terrorism' or 'ISF Activity', S Ubaidur Rahman, *Milli Gazette*, July 16-31, 2001). The *Milli Gazette* also points out that, despite his allegations of several madrasas along the Indo-Nepal border being used as ISI bases, former UP chief minister, Ram Prakash Gupta, was unable to identify even a single such Muslim school. ('In Which Madrasa Is Training for Subversion Imparted?: UP Chief Minister Unable to Reply', *Milli Gazette*, Vol 1, No 19). Uttar Pradesh's director-general of police, Sriram Arun, while arguing that the ISI was active along the Indo-Nepal border, is said to have denied allegations that it was using madrasas as hideouts ('Top UP Cop: No ISI Presence in Madrasas', *Milli Gazette*). Likewise, the *Milli Gazette* reports, the director general of police of Rajasthan, another border state, admitted that the madrasas in the border areas are 'neither centres of ISI nor have they ever participated till date in any anti-national activities' ('No ISI Activity in Rajasthan Border Madrasas', *Milli Gazette*, Vol 2, No 3).

There are several thousand Islamic schools spread all across India today. Most mosques have a primary religious school or maktab attached to them, where

Muslim children learn the *Qur'an* and the basics of their faith. For children who desire to specialise in religious studies and train as imams and maulvis, numerous large seminaries or madrasas exist, each Muslim sect having its own chain of such institutions. For many poor families, madrasas are the only source of education for their children, since they charge no fees and provide free boarding and lodging to their students. Given what is said to be the dismal level of educational provision for Muslims, added to which is the perceived anti-Muslim bias that is being sought to be incorporated into the curricula in government schools, madrasas are often the only available option for the education of children from poor Muslim families. Madrasas have for long played an important role in promoting literacy among the Muslims, who have the dubious distinction of being, along with the neo-Buddhist dalits, the least educated community in India.

Role of Madrasas

Nor have madrasas lagged behind in working for the cause of the country as a whole. In fact, graduates from madrasas as well as founders of some of the leading Muslim seminaries in India played an important role in the struggle against the British, a fact that is often ignored in certain school history textbooks. Leading 'ulema-led uprisings against the British in the mid-19th century and even later, reformist 'ulema kept aloft the banner of defiance in the Pathan borderlands till they were forcibly put down by the British. Madrasa teachers and students, such as Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and Maulana Barkatullah Khan Bhopali, were among the first few Indians to demand complete freedom for India - this in complete contrast to the pro-British policy of both Hindu as well as Muslim communalist groups. Most madrasas vehemently opposed the Muslim League and its two-nation theory, demanding a united India where people of different faiths could live together in harmony.

This is not to say that all is well with the madrasas today. Many madrasas in Pakistan, for instance, have now emerged as breeding grounds for self-styled jihadists, including the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Lashkar-e-Toiba in Kashmir. In fact, it seems that the experience of these madrasas in Pakistan has fuelled the fear of the madrasas in India going the same way. But, critics argue, this fear might indeed be misplaced as there is little or no evidence of any Indian madrasas being actually involved in ISI-related

activities. Speaking at a recently organised seminar on the madrasa system and quoted in the *Milli Gazette*, Maulana Obaidullah Khan Azmi, MP, asserted that not a single madrasa had been found to be harbouring ISI agents, adding that if any were in future found to be doing so, the Muslims themselves would demand that it be shut down (Mazhar Imam, 'Madrasas and Future of Indian Muslims', *Milli Gazette*, August 1-15, 2001).

Instead of targeting the madrasas as potential sources of instability, a far-sighted government could have used them to help improve India's relations with Muslim countries and even to help influence the policies of countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan towards India. Indian madrasas, such as the Dar-ul 'Ulum, Deoband, the Mazahir-ul 'Ulum, Saharanpur and the Nadwat-ul 'Ulama, Lucknow, are widely respected all over the Muslim world, the first mentioned being the largest madrasa in the whole of Asia and the second largest in the world. Many Muslims in neighbouring Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh follow the school of thought established by these madrasas. If the state had sought to work in tandem with these madrasas, they could well have served important foreign policy goals of the country by helping to combat the radical appeal of the so-called jihadist elements within Pakistan, while assuaging Muslim fears of a threat to their identity and their religious freedom in India. That the Hindutva camp has chosen to do otherwise is hardly surprising, however. The orchestrated campaign against the madrasas can also be seen as yet another assault on the rights of the Muslims and on institutions basic to the preservation and promotion of their faith and their sense of identity, this being integral to the fiercely anti-Muslim Hindutva world view.

Not many critics of the madrasas would probably have themselves ever visited a madrasa, and so much of what they say is pure hearsay. Yet, it may indeed be true that in some madrasas students are taught to see all non-Muslims in far from flattering colours, as irredeemable infidels, as rebels against god doomed to perdition in hell and so on. That understanding of the 'other' is, needless to say, something that they share with Hindutva militants, whose image of Muslims is no less lurid. A critical examination of, for instance, the fiery rhetoric of the Lashkar-e-Toiba or the Students Islamic Movement of India, on the one hand, and groups like the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal, on the other, would reveal how much they share in common, despite their apparent differences - an

undying hostility to democracy and secularism, an incurable allergy to pluralism, and a total lack of genuine tolerance for people of other faiths, for instance. The only way people of different faiths can learn to see each other as fellow human beings deserving respect is by promoting inter-faith dialogue and liberal understandings of religion indispensable for harmonious co-existence in a plural society such as ours. Unfortunately, the crusade against the madrasas will guarantee that this does not happen, for the myth of an irreconcilable hostility between Hindus and Muslims is as central to radical Islamist discourse as it is to the Hindutva world view. The targeting of the madrasas can only play into the hands of both Hindu as well as Islamic militants, and further reduce the already faint prospects of Muslim-Hindu inter-faith dialogue - and, with it, the possibility of changing the way some madrasa students might be taught to look at people of other faiths.

If madrasas continue to be targeted there would also be little hope for them to be able to drag themselves out of the morass in which they find themselves today. Having met several madrasa students and teachers myself, I am aware that many of them are now increasingly concerned with what they see as their outdated and increasingly irrelevant curriculum and methods of teaching. As a leading Indian Muslim social activist and intellectual, Nejatullah Siddiqui, writes in his recently published Urdu book *Dim Madaris: Masa'il Aur Taqazey* (Religious Madrasas: Problems and Prospects), there is a growing realisation among the Muslims of the pressing need for madrasas to reform their syllabi to enable their students to face challenges of modern life and to evolve a more relevant understanding of their faith. But, many Muslims insist, this cannot be imposed by force. It is only in a climate of peace and security, when Muslims are free from any perception of threat to their faith and identity, that madrasas can begin a process of reform. Instigating attacks against them and fanning flames of anti-Muslim terror would not only dampen all hopes for reform but might even make the fear of militancy a self-fulfilling prophecy. Surely, then, the best way to put to rest fears of madrasas turning into militant havens is to allay Muslim insecurities, and to spare no efforts at guaranteeing that every community feels safe and protected. But with Hindutva militants brazenly determined to fan anti-Muslim hatred and dividing the country against itself, and with radical Islamist groups in turn, adding fuel to the fire, that itself seems a distant hope. EPW