

03 DEC 2001

'Funds are always a problem for madrasas'

By Shabnam Minwalla
Times News Network

MUMBAI: Even as Islamic scholars express the need to modernise 'madarasas', many such institutes of Islamic learning follow an archaic syllabus, heed their own rules, and have little truck with the reality outside their cloistered classrooms.

Today, a handful of madarasas in places like Azamgarh and Lucknow manage to straddle the sacred and the secular. But these are exceptions. Most tiny, two-room madarasas focus on the recitation of the Koran, while their more established counterparts tackle subjects like Arabic literature and Islamic logic.

But who would choose this uncertain route instead of the familiar path signposted by SSC and BA? "A majority of our students is from extremely poor UP and West Bengal families," says Syed Ather Ali, general secretary of the 350-strong Darul Uloom Mohammadia located next to Minara Masjid. "For many, the free food and shelter are a big attraction."

Adds Man Merchant, an educationist who senses that the enrolment in madarasas is rising, "Since the

1992 riots, there has been a distinct return to religion among Muslims. But enrolling a child in a madrasa is still an extreme step. By and large, the students are the poorest of the poor." Mumbai has about 50 established madarasas—and innumerable informal ones in tiny mosques and rickety shanties. Most survive on community donations, and are run according to the whims of the maulvi. While the residential institutes get students from the impoverished hamlets of UP and Bihar, the day centres cater largely to working children and school drop-outs.

"There is no standard curriculum, and certainly no uniform ideology," says K.S. Syed, officer on special duty with the Minorities Commission. Adds Mr Jamkhanwala, "When I took on chairmanship of the Darul Uloom Imdadia, for example, there wasn't even a system of roll-call or sick leave. Things were utterly disorganised." Indeed, one reason why madarasas cannot avail of the modernisation scheme is that many flunk the criteria—some lack registration, others the necessary documents. "The government must adopt a lib-

eral, pro-active approach," says Ms Syed, adding that the Sena-BJP government didn't even publicise the programme when it was introduced. Agrees Mufti Salim Akhtar of a Malad-based madrasa, "If I had heard of this scheme, I would definitely have applied. We are very keen to introduce subjects like English and Computers, but funds are always a problem."

Of course, not all madrasa managements are equally open. Some seem paranoid about government interference and scrutiny—an attitude which Muslim liberals rue. "In fact," says Mr Ahmed, "besides financial benefits, the stamp of government recognition would remove the stigma associated with madarasas."

Even conservative managements, however, admit the need to supplement the present curriculum. Some have requested computer classes to train their students, others are introducing vocational courses like tailoring and shoemaking. "We are planning a network of madarasas in Mumbai, and hope to introduce a common certificate," says Mr Ather Ali describing this as a first step towards much-needed standards. Agrees Mr Jamkhanwala, "It is not enough just to feed these children and teach them a smattering of religion. The community has to ensure that they are moulded into productive members of society."

ED1

**Communalization of education
Religious Schools**