



## Religions and Development Research Programme

# Ambivalent state-madrasa relationships and madrasa modernization in India

About a fifth of the population of India is Muslim, although the proportion varies between States and localities. Overall, as demonstrated by the Sachar Committee Report of 2006, Muslims are a disadvantaged group, with educational levels lower than the population as a whole. Although fewer than four per cent of Muslim children attend madrasas, both the central and State governments have developed programmes designed to 'modernize' their curriculum and improve the quality of education they offer. While many madrasas offering education equivalent to the primary and secondary levels have chosen to accept financial assistance, governments' real motives are not clear and the programmes are regarded with suspicion by many Muslims.

Implications of the findings summarized in this brief were discussed with participants from the government and madrasa education sectors in Lucknow on September 13, 2008, and are summarized below.

### The study

Madrasas in many countries appear to be caught between the need to maintain their identity as centres of Islamic studies and culture and at the same time to remain relevant to the present-day needs of the communities they serve. They attempt to negotiate between these competing pressures, while the state seeks to 'modernize' them. The research in India was undertaken as part of an international comparative study that sought to develop a better understanding of state-madrasa relationships and how these affect attempts to reform madrasa education. It examined the motives and strategies of madrasas and their associations, the central government and two State governments.

The states of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal were selected for study, in order to understand the impact of different socio-political

situations on state-madrasa relationships. Both have relatively large Muslim populations, but different socio-political environments and different levels of state engagement with madrasas. A range of political parties has governed Uttar Pradesh (UP) over the last few years, while West Bengal has been under a predominantly communist regime for the last three decades. The research was based on a review of secondary materials, interviews with government officials and religious leaders at both central and State levels, and visits to selected madrasas in the two case study states.

### Background

Three stages in the evolution of madrasa education vis-à-vis the state in India can be identified, during which madrasas have been transformed from mainstream to minority religious educational institutions. At present, state-madrasa relationships, as well as the institution itself, appear to be at a crossroads, pulled between a state that is focused on 'modernizing' madrasas and debate within the madrasa system itself on the nature of contemporary education and the extent and nature of necessary reforms. Of late, state-madrasa relationships have also been coloured by the larger global political context, which has polarized sentiments about Muslims as a community.

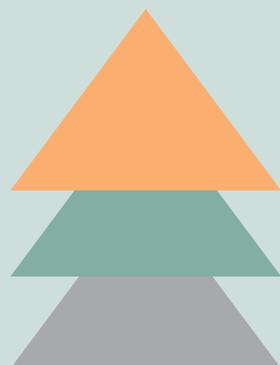
### From mainstream to religious education

Madrasas were the main education providers during the Mughal period, producing administrators as well as religious scholars and teachers. Following the colonial government's establishment of a schooling system on the British model to produce local administrative staff, madrasas retreated from a close relationship with the state to the provision of religious education. The *ulema* (scholars) and others set up several large madrasas, many in the

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The main policy implications of the research include:

- Attempts to improve the educational levels of the Muslim minority in India should focus on the vast majority of Muslim children who attend government schools
- The government should clarify its reasons for supporting madrasas
- Madrasas' constitutional right to provide religious education should be upheld
- Improvements are needed to the range of subjects and quality of teaching in madrasas
- Where madrasas lack the resources for improvements, there is a role for government to contribute, but problems in the design and implementation of current programmes need to be addressed
- Measures to achieve equivalence between madrasas and government schools are desirable
- Changes in madrasas must be responsive to the future livelihood needs of poor students
- Madrasas appear to have more positive relationships with government if they form associations





A girls' madrasa in Sitapur, India

north of the country, especially in the area later known as Uttar Pradesh. The aim was to preserve traditional Islamic learning by separating *dini talim* (religious education) from *duniyavi talim* (worldly education), but it led to a divide between religious and mainstream education, and to a view of the madrasa curriculum as rigid and unchanging.

Increasingly, better off families began to send their children to English medium schools, to ensure access to jobs, especially in administration or law. In contrast, the opportunities for upward social mobility, free board and lodging, education and the prospect of a livelihood as an *imam*, *maulvi* or madrasa teacher encouraged many *ajlaf* (lower class) and poorer households to send their sons to madrasas. Thus, the resource base for madrasas declined, and the employment prospects and socio-economic profile of their students changed.

### The post-independence period

State-madrasa relationships since independence have been influenced by three inter-related factors: the state's constitutional obligations to minorities, the quest for political power of parties with different ideologies and bases of electoral support, and finally, the madrasas themselves, with their need to survive as institutions while continuing to offer religious education.

Following partition, large scale emigration to Pakistan occurred, including many members of the intellectual Muslim middle class. Although the numbers of madrasas grew, especially where government schools were not provided, and some have adopted a mixed secular and religious curriculum, many provide only religious education, primarily for the poor. They include *maktabs* (Qur'anic schools associated with local mosques) and madrasas, which provide an education to children in the primary and secondary school age groups and beyond, with numbers falling off steeply beyond the primary school age. Most operate independently, while some are formally or informally associated with the leading madrasas, which promote increasingly polarized schools of thought. Madrasas depend on Muslim religious charity or a *waqf* (endowment) and their stance may be conservative or liberal.

Madrasas are spread across the country and their numbers are thought to have grown in recent years, but there is no accurate count: estimates vary from 8,000 to 30,000. The most quoted figure is that of the Home Ministry, according to which Uttar Pradesh has the largest number (10,000+), followed by Kerala (9,975), Madhya Pradesh (6,000), Bihar (3,500) Gujarat (1,825) and Rajasthan (1,780). (approx 2.1 million pupils) There are two types of madrasa: those that operate within the government system by virtue of being 'recognized', at times also receiving

grant-in-aid, and those outside the system, which may or may not teach mainstream subjects. Bihar is said to have the largest number of recognized and assisted madrasas (1,100). There has been a gradual growth in madrasa education for girls. However, there is also a growing perception that a madrasa education now has little to offer as a means of accessing a livelihood, even in the informal or trading sectors in which many Muslims work, which may constrain future growth in the numbers of madrasas. Although a few madrasa associations have existed for some time, many madrasas do not belong to them and there is no evidence that they coordinate with each other. A recent proposal for a Central Madrasa Education Board was met with widespread opposition.

**“The Indian constitution ... explicitly recognizes Muslims as a minority group,.. with ... rights including the entitlement to establish their own educational institutions”**

The Indian constitution safeguards religious freedom and explicitly recognizes Muslims as a minority group, providing them with various rights including the entitlement to establish their own educational institutions. However, until the early 1990s, when a formal, structured modernization programme was initiated, madrasas were mostly tolerated but neglected by the government.

### The madrasa modernization programme

The centrally sponsored programme for madrasa modernization provides grants-in-aid, almost wholly focused on 'modernizing' the curriculum by bringing in mainstream subjects and, in some cases, improving teaching methods. As State governments are responsible for education, central government funds are channelled through them, and they may also institute their own programmes, providing scope for different approaches and outcomes. Because of problems in the design and administration of the programme and because many madrasas did not wish to participate, it took off slowly and only developed momentum with the launch of the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) programme, the Government of India's version of Universal Elementary Education under the international Education for All agenda.

The *Area Intensive and Madrasa Modernization Programme*, which was started in 1993/4, now forms a component of the SSA programme. Its objective is to encourage madrasas to introduce the teaching of science, maths, social studies, Hindi and English, in order to provide opportunities for students to acquire education comparable to that available in the mainstream school system. Initially for madrasas providing the equivalent of primary education, it was extended to those providing education at secondary level in 1997. The Tenth Plan set a target of reaching 5,000 madrasas (less than 15 per cent of the total in the eight states where relatively large numbers of madrasas are found). By 2007 the numerical target had nearly been achieved, but a smaller proportion of allocated funds had been disbursed than planned, which informants attributed to government's failure to publicize the programme and madrasas' reluctance to seek assistance for fear of government interference.

State governments can also set up centres under the Education Guarantee Scheme or initiate interventions in unrecognized madrasas, especially girls' madrasas, under the Alternative and Innovative Education (A&IE) component, through which free textbooks and an additional teacher can be provided. This

programme targets madrasas in 99 districts in 16 states, especially Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Assam. In the year 2005-06 about 3,500 unrecognized madrasas received support under the A&IE component.

In order to structure and streamline support, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Assam, all states with a substantial Muslim population, have constituted or reconstituted State-level madrasa education boards.

Participation in the 'modernization' process is voluntary. While the better resourced madrasas choose to keep out of state-funded programmes, a small but significant number of those that have limited access to funds are happy to engage with the state and comply with the conditions imposed.

***Madrasas with limited access to funds are happy to receive state support and comply with the conditions ....however, there are problems with the implementation of the schemes.***

Madrasas that have remained independent of the state are tolerant of those that have opted to participate in the programmes. Engagement is viewed as a convenient arrangement that enables resource-poor madrasas to generate adequate funds and to integrate mainstream with religious education. However, there are numerous problems with the implementation of the scheme, especially in states like Uttar Pradesh, where most of the irritants in state-madrasa relationships appear to be operational problems that are also common in the administration of government-supported mainstream schools. Madrasas complain of unhelpful government officials and departments. Recent strains were attributed by informants primarily to the failure of the State government to keep its promise to provide assistance to madrasas, rather than to Muslim minority fear of suppression.

The number of madrasas supported by the West Bengal State government under the Communist Party of India (Marxist) more than doubled between 1977 (238) and 2006 (507). In 1995 the existing madrasa education board was reconstituted as the West Bengal Board for Madrasa Education (WBBME), one of five autonomous government bodies responsible for education in the state, and madrasa teachers were integrated into the government system. The Board has a remit to direct, supervise and control madrasas in accordance with guidelines issued by the State government. It has access to relevant SSA components and funds, including training for the madrasas' management committee members and provision of teaching and learning materials. Madrasa education provides qualifications equivalent those in the government system, attracting some non-Muslim students and enabling graduates to transfer between the systems. The WBBME counts as its strengths its 'secular' (non-religiously biased) character, an increasingly co-educational system and the effective process of convergence with mainstream education.

***Critics fear that the state intends to increase its control over madrasas.***

However, in states such as West Bengal and Bihar, extensive secularization of the curriculum of state-supported madrasas offering primary and secondary education, control over the recruitment of teachers and increased government monitoring confirm critics' fear that the state regards them as schools like

any other, over which it intends to increase its control. Thus some believe that such madrasas have lost their distinctive religious educational function and are Islamic in name only. 'Modernization' has apparently been equated with 'westernization' by some *ulema*, who resist the proposed changes. While 'modernization' rather than 'reform' is the stated objective of state interventions, several critics believe that this is only a step away from more extensive 'reforms' in the future. It was this fear that gave rise to the widespread opposition to the proposed Central Madrasa Education Board.

## Modernization and politics

Although many madrasas welcome government support, it is also criticized as being merely a ploy by governments and political parties anxious to garner minority votes. Muslims constitute only 15 per cent of the population, but almost 95 per cent participate in the electoral process and there are fewer caste divisions amongst them, so their support is valuable to political parties. There are signs of more direct involvement in politics. For example, in West Bengal, madrasas that want to retain their independence and that also fear being accused of terrorism have formed an association of their own, the Rabeta-e-Madarise. While its President stated that the political parties themselves had never deliberately sought to court the madrasas, he and the other leaders have decided that political engagement may now be desirable. Thus, he is politically active in West Bengal and heads the State chapter of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, an Islamic political party.

Ripples from the larger international controversy regarding madrasas' alleged association with terrorism have given a new twist to state-madrasa relationships in India. Given this and Muslim opposition to government interference, both the state and madrasas are wary of open confrontation and the former is proceeding cautiously with the modernization process. Although many argue that Muslim doubts are about the nature and extent of modernization and who leads it, rather than modernization per se, the madrasas do not speak with a common voice and are not organized to negotiate with the state for support on their own terms.



Madrasa in Sitapur, India

Clearly, state-madrasa relationships are not apolitical. The political dimensions and influences vary over time and between States, depending on the nature of the governments in power, especially at sub-national level. In Uttar Pradesh, tensions between the state and madrasas are related to the perceived non-fulfilment of electoral promises of support, as well as poor administration, while in West Bengal, tensions arise from the issues of safeguarding ideological territory and operational independence.

## Summary of findings

State-madrasa relationships are shaped by constitutional, political and educational factors:

- Muslims in India have official minority status: their right to practise their religion and establish institutions (including educational institutions) is safeguarded in the constitution, enabling them to resist excessive state interference.
- The nature and extent of state engagement with madrasas is influenced by the political ideology and electoral interests of national and regional political parties. When madrasas feel threatened, they may seek to protect themselves by organizing and seeking political backing.
- Data on the numbers of madrasas and maktabas and student enrolment are poor, although it is asserted that numbers have increased in some parts of the country in recent years.
- In addition to their primary purpose of providing religious education, many madrasas have long included a few other academic and vocational subjects in their curriculum, although the coverage and quality is generally limited.

The main features of the madrasa modernization programme include:

- A stated aim of 'modernizing' the content and quality of madrasa education, although several critics were concerned that the government may be planning more extensive 'reforms' in the near future.
- Voluntary participation, although in some States, such as West Bengal, extensive secularization of the curriculum of state-supported madrasas offering primary and secondary education, control over the recruitment of teachers and increased government monitoring confirm critics' fear that the state intends to increase its control over madrasas.
- A variety of support programmes are on offer (mainly centrally funded and delivered by State governments), but many implementation problems were identified, especially in Uttar Pradesh.
- While the better-resourced madrasas choose to stay out of state-funded programmes, a small but significant number of the poorly funded are happy to engage and to comply with various conditions in return for the financial and other support provided.
- Madrasas lack organizations that can negotiate with the state for support on their own terms.

## Policy implications

Given the general environment of mutual suspicion and opposition from some quarters to the state-led process of modernization, both the state and the madrasas are treading cautiously.

However, extensive debates on the findings of the Sachar Committee suggest increased recognition that continued Muslim disadvantage is both politically undesirable and a hindrance to achieving development objectives. Policy implications include:

- Serious attempts to improve the educational levels of the Muslim minority in India must focus on the vast majority of Muslim children who attend government schools.
- Madrasas' constitutional right to provide religious education should be upheld, but not necessarily supported with state funds.
- The state should make a policy statement that clearly articulates its reason for supporting madrasas, to lessen mistrust of its motives.
- Changes must be responsive to the future livelihood needs of poor students in the madrasa system.
- Improvements to the range of subjects and quality of teaching in madrasas providing primary and secondary education are needed.
- Measures to achieve equivalence between madrasas and government schools are desirable, to enable madrasa students to progress to higher levels of education.
- Where madrasas themselves lack the resources for improvements, government can contribute through relatively modest levels of funding, quality control etc, but problems in the design and implementation of the current programmes need to be addressed.
- Madrasas seeking to modernize and obtain support appear to have more constructive relationships with the state if they form an association that can interact with a government equivalent, such as the West Bengal Board for Madrasa Education.
- Further research is needed to identify the motives and socio-economic characteristics of parents who send their children to madrasas, and to evaluate the outcomes of madrasa modernization policies for madrasas and their associations, as well as students and their wider communities.



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### Further information

This policy brief is based on Padmaja Nair (2009) *The State and Madrasas in India, Birmingham: Religions and Development Research Programme WP 15* [www.rad.bham.ac.uk](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk)

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