

The Masjid as Madrasah: Reviving Its Role in Talim, Character Formation, and Community Empowerment

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Abstract: The Madrasah, coming from the Arabic word Darasa meaning "to teach," has always been central to Islamic education. From the earliest days of Islam through the Fatimi period, the Masjid-Madrasah model combined Ibadah and Talim, offering both religious and scientific education. Rasulullah (S) set the foundation by attaching Talim to the Masjid, making it not just a place for Salaat but also for teaching every aspect of life. This model was at the heart of Muslim society and culture. Important examples include Masjid al-Kufah, where Amir al-Mumineen Ali (AS) gave a series of Asb'aq, and the Jame Arwa – Masjid-Madrasah at Zijiblah in Yemen, which produced outstanding scholars nearly a thousand years ago. Over time, however, the decline of Muslim rulers' support and the rise of colonial powers weakened the Madrasah. The "colonial foxes" deliberately created a divide between those trained in Madaris and those educated in colonial schools, reducing the role of the Madrasah to very narrow religious teaching. Today, many Madaris face challenges such as outdated curricula, poor management, and political misuse. This paper explores these issues and argues for urgent reform, especially updating the curriculum, including modern sciences, and ensuring better organisation. One major problem is the lack of skilled teachers. Without good salaries, job security, and respect, highly qualified teachers will not join Madrasah service. Philanthropists therefore have a key role to play in supporting the Masjid-Madrasah system financially. Islam itself values 'ilm in all its forms and allows full academic freedom, as long as knowledge serves humanity. This shows that the separation between Masjid and Madrasah is not real, they are meant to work together, supporting both spiritual growth and intellectual progress. By returning to the early spirit of Islam, the Masjid-Madrasah can once again become a place of holistic education, balancing tradition with modern needs. Reviving this model would not only strengthen Muslim education but also restore the cultural and intellectual vitality of the Ummah. It would help Muslims remain rooted in Shariah while also gaining the tools needed to face modern challenges, ensuring both worldly progress and Najaat in the Akhirah.

Keywords: Madrasah, Islamic education, Muslim society, colonialism, quality of education, Masjid-Madrasah, reform, curriculum, fanaticism, intellectual decline, socio-political role, philanthropy, modernization, secular education

1. Introduction of Madrasah institution:

The word Madrasah is an Arabic word, which has its origin from the word Mudarris, which comes from the root word of Daras, which means to enlighten or to teach. Therefore, Madrasah is a place of learning, with a similar meaning to that of school. Particularly it is similar to the Church missionary school. In both these places, education is given, and people go there for acquiring knowledge. The role of Madrasah in Muslim Society has been linked with the dawn of Islam. Till the medieval era of Islam, it was the Madaris, which produced a large number of scholars, in all branches of Knowledge, who bestowed inventions to the world in their respective fields. Prior to the beginning of the Crusades, the power of the Muslim intellect activities started declining due to the weakness of their educational system.

It was not revised to the requirement of their times or era, while the West completely transformed the Sciences of the East, especially from the Muslims. A great renaissance was experienced in the dark history of western civilization. With a limited approach, this spirit of the East continued in the Ottoman Empire, and in the Central Asian region, especially in Iran, but civil wars, differences, and military expeditions never allowed the progress of the Eastern institutions. Monarchs paid less attention to the development of educational institutions, which weakened the internal system and ultimately declined the power and command.

In the Indian Subcontinent, the history of Muslim contribution is very limited. Monarchs spent their time in luxuries mostly. They built gardens, palaces and mausoleums, but did not pay due attention to building and reforming educational institutions like those of al-Azhar, al-Anwar, al-Aqmar, al-Lulu, Jame ibn Tulun in al-Qahirah and Jame Sanaa, Jame Arwa in Zijiblah-Yemen.

It was Rasulullah(S) and his Wasi Amir al-Mumineen Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) who utilized Masjid for various purposes of the welfare of the Ummah. Talim was one of the leading purpose for which they used Masjid as Madrasah in their respective era. Afterwards, Al-Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as) and Al-Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as) trained thousands of students in various disciplines in Masjid. The Fatimi Imams (as) inherited this glorious tradition of their forefathers, Muhammad (S) and Ali (as) perfectly; therefore they demonstrated this Nabavi Sunnah and Alavi Sirah in al-Mahdiyyah first and later in Al Muizziyyah al- Qahirah. As soon as the Fatimi Imam al-Muizz (as) conquered Misr, he instructed his commander and Da'i, Sayyiduna Jawhar al-Siqili (d. 382 AH /992 CE), the conqueror of the Misr and builder of Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah to build Jame al-Azhar. This seat of learning is still well known around the world, even after one thousand years. Although hostile rulers tried with full force to remove the names of the Aimmat Fatimiyyin from the pages of history, but whenever name of al-Azhar, al-Anwar, al-Aqmar come and people visit in these Masajid to offer Salaat or to get Knowledge from the organized Halqah of Asb'aaq inside, immediately contribution of the Fatimiyyin come in mind with regard of Masjid-Madrasah.

The Fatimi Imams were among those rulers who utilized Masjid-Madrasah for advance education. Fatimi Imam al-Hakim is one of those Mazlum who has been accused of non-committed crimes, by the opponent of Ahl al-Bait (as). He built Masjid and Madrasah and mentioned before his name Abdullah (slave of Allah) yet hostile historians presented concocted stories against him that he claimed divinity. Can a claimant of divinity mentioned with his name Abdullah or built Masjid? What logical reply bias historians have? Anyhow! The only reality is he had built a modern scientific research center and used Masjid for 'ibadah and higher education simultaneously. The relatively small Masjid al-Aqmar in Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah founded by Fatimi Imam al-Aamir in 519 AH /1125 CE, is an ideal institution of learning tradition. Jame al-Aqmar like other Fatimi Masajid had played a great socio-political and spiritual-historical role to disseminate various sciences. This tradition was transferred to Yemen where Saint Queen of Yemen, Al Sayyidah al-Hurrah Arwa bint Ahmad al-Sulayhi ruled from Zijiblah and also taught in Masjid-Madrasah. If we wish to remove the darkness of ignorance on large scale, while funds are small and problems are multiple, Masjid-Madrasah is a bounty. We should review this forgotten tradition and use our Masajid for academic purposes now - it is a real Jih'ad – and an easy method to eliminate darkness and spread Knowledge.

Unfortunately while Muslim rulers were busy in profligacy, during the medieval era, the intellectuals of the west were busy in the construction of top education institutions like Oxford, Cambridge (England), Sorbonne (France) and Harvard (USA) etc. Perhaps, if Muslim Sultans had paid a little attention to educational institutions; the history of Muslims would have been different. Lack of support of Muslim Sultans never allowed Madaris the opportunity to progress and standardization according to the need of the time. As a result, the unfortunate Muslim community has paid a very heavy penalty. Seizing this golden opportunity to control the power and command of the Muslim dominated areas, non-Muslim colonial foxes snatched the spirit of understanding, and drastically introduced Church-missionary-Schools, and created a vast gulf in between the School educated and Madrasah trained class.

2. Isolated Profession:

These colonial rulers closed the doors of professional activities for the Madrasah trained and confined their role within the boundaries of religious customs and activities. As per colonial designed policy, these foreign foxes diminished the role of Madrasah trained class in the socio-cultural life of the Muslim dominated countries. They declared only those are eligible for handling the affairs of the socio-economic system who were groomed from their institutions.

Therefore, the controlling power reached the hands of the Westernized Muslim minds. It was the English master brains, like Macaulay, that injected the slow poison that the only job of the Madrasah is to reinforce the orthodox practices of the Religion. Lord Macaulay's address to the British Parliament 2nd February 1835 is self-explanatory. He says:

"I have travelled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief, such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such caliber, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break

the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and, therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation”.

Cunning British East India Company followed this advice as a policy, in all their colonies. To minimize Muslims socio-economical as well as the political role, official media played a significant function. It is unfortunate that these Madaris did not update their curriculum according to the need of the time, and thus their area of operation shrank. It curtailed the role of Madrasah trained class and made them powerless, as well as helpless in professional fields. A huge gulf was created between the Madaris trained and the School educated class by colonial Power, with intention of divide and rule.

I have observed fairly closely a Madrasah and its functional system. Round the year donations are campaigned by the clerics for Madaris. Due to the non-accountability of funds, the management of the Madaris enjoys the donations more than the students. Their lavish lifestyle is dependent on non-countable sources of donations. It is a dire need of the time to use rightly the public funds. It is the responsibility of the donation providers to keep a strict vigilant eye on the utilization of their funds.

Majority of the students of the Madaris are very fanatical. They never study Islam according to a scientific system or manner, but follow it blindly. Several research reports provide the conclusion of observation regarding the most favorite topic of Madrasah students. They largely discuss Jih’ad more often than of any other practice of Islam for the benefit of humanity. I once asked a 15-year-old Madrasah student:

What the greatest deed of all?

He replied:

“Killing Shia-Kafir”,

Today, “Takfir” is a term largely used for rivals and their associates. Similarly, when I questioned a Shaikh of the Madrasah:

What is the great deed for a Muslim?

He replied:

“To Donate a Substantial Amount for the Madrasah + Ulama and Jih’ad”.

These two remarks are enough to reflect the mentality of the Muslim clerics at large.

A few Arab countries are responsible to defame the institution of Madrasah due to their misuse of Madrasah as breeding farms of fanaticism. Another disease, which largely affects the minds of Madrasah trained, is their self-glorification. A malicious attitude has been found amongst the clergy, which is that they think themselves not less than “Hindu Sacred Cow”. Islam does not allow any space for Hindu Mythology. There is no “Sacred Class” or Holy Family, nor is anyone above the law or accountability, in Islam. It is the arch responsibility of the Muslim intellectuals to establish among the students the understanding to fight against the evils prevailing in our

society. It is time that the attention of the students of the Madaris should be drawn to the fact that to kill your opponent is not a Jih'ad but a crime.

To kill their personal evil misdeeds is real Jih'ad. Equal stress should be paid on the other fundamentals of Islam, i.e. Muaml'at of their daily life. In fact, as long as the Muslims at large will not clear their role in Muaml'at of the daily life, an ideal Muslim society cannot be established. Likewise, Madrasah graduates are taught how to put down other schools of thought, through interesting expertise called 'Refutation', whenever chance permits. Rival sects do not target other religions, but various Muslim sects.

3. Quality of Education:

The quality of education and manner of instruction in the Madaris today is not up to date. Definitely, Madrasah education is not serving its required goal. In the rural area especially, children from the masses have the only source of learning i.e. a Madrasah. It is the need of the time to improve the quality of education by drastic changes. A strong, up-to-date curriculum is indispensable. The government should control the education policy and introduce a country-wide syllabus. Awareness with modern subjects like Mathematics, Science, and Information Technology should be introduced.

If we examine the Church controlled schools, we find them well organized in all manners. Christian missionaries are trained through well-known Trinity Academic Institutions, where they learn modern subjects and languages as well. Thus producing a seasoned person who can play the role of a bridge between the material and spiritual world. Not only the Pope and the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church but the head of the City mission are highly skilled in the Sacred Sciences; holding doctorate degrees from well-known recognized institutions, which groom them into highly talented scholars. Today, preachers of all religion are highly skilled. Contrary to them, very, unfortunately, Islam is preached by characterless, shortsighted, and corrupt clergy, who are not well versed with the language of Qur'an and Islam. The resulting dilemma is before our eyes.

The Clergy of the Madaris should not try to teach technical, as well as professional subjects unless they have the command, ability and qualification. Modern scholars are strictly needed, but how do you draw the attention of the competent scholars to serve in Madaris? You cannot enjoy the passion of driving a BMW in the price of a Suzuki. The curriculum in the Madaris needs serious reconstruction. So, what do we do? If you ask any highly skilled faculty member to leave a lucrative job and join the Madrasah service with lower remuneration along with no job security or attractive package, would he agree? Surely not, management should offer high remuneration to faculty members. The Government, of course, has to be dynamically involved. The responsibility of providing the required resources and finances for such operations descends primarily on the Government's shoulders. A modest increase in the budget allocated annually to education can serve a grand purpose in this regard. Reform in education through announcement is not enough; practical changes are needed.

It is a high time to change the mode of education and provide a countrywide opportunity for students to leave the expensive schools, which are in fact money generating industries, by establishing Masjid-Madrasah chain everywhere. It may be the last chance to rebuild the Muslim Community, across the global village, and to return towards lost glory. Bold steps must be taken; a portion of each large Masjid premises must now be earmarked for a modern Madrasah imparting knowledge to the student in both, the religious as well as scientific social and modern subjects. If these steps are not taken, the already decayed structure may be doomed, and recovering from it may be impossible.

The present educational system is the outcome of social injustice; it is anti-progressive and anti-social in nature as well as anti-Islamic in spirit? The literate class is well aware of the faults of the current colonial educational system prevalent in the third world, especially in Muslim countries, but none of them could muster enough moral and political courage or enough integrity to ban them. This is the best possible solution to clear the Madrasah from the hostiles.

4. Exploitation for Political purposes:

It was the CIA who used Madrasah for their nefarious political cause, to destroy the Soviet Union. You will not find in any Madrasah curriculum, violence as a subject. It is necessary to reform the mode of Madrasah and use it as the most modern tool to produce a society of welfare. Diversification of courses such as Economics, Business administration, modern scientific study of Tafsir, Hadith and Fiqh. Basic reforms are needed so that people have the right skills to earn money.

It's completely ridiculous to treat Madrasah system less valuable than others. There is a difference of approach between a modern school system that is minting factories and Madrasah who are playing their role with the help of philanthropist nicely. Over the centuries, it was only the Madaris, which produced a literate class of Muslims, at large, besides the home-trained scholars. At present, there are several Madaris in different countries, but very limited are eligible to provide education according to the modern scientific standard. Most Madaris are attached with the Masjid, as per tradition, where children acquire education.

History provides us with the extensive multipurpose role of Masjid as an ideal Madrasah. Masjid al-Nabawi is a glorious example of the coming generation to follow. This Masjid served its significant role, as Madrasah, during Nabawi era prominently. Masjid al-Kufa is famous for learning; Ali (as) conducted a series of Asb'aaq in this place. During the glorious era of Bani Fatimah (as) Masjid had played an important role to Broadcast the message of Islam and disseminate Knowledge. Masjid from its birth is an ideal example of Madrasah for us to follow. In the mountainous region of Yemen, surrounded by rivers, Masjid-Madrasah at Zijiblah played a vital role to prepare a team of scholars of high caliber. History cannot ignore the shimmering fact that the mentor of the scholars was a lady, Al Sayyidah al-Hurrah Arwa bint Ahmad, who conducted a series of lectures behind the curtain. Scholars of Iran, Afghanistan, India, al-Qahirah, and Hijaz attended her series of lectures, with profound devotion. Intellectuals of the time visited Yemen from far and near to acquire Knowledge. Yemen witnessed this glorious era

from 440 (A.H.) to 532 (A.H.). A Yemeni poet beautifully described the status of Zijiblah in the following words:

*“Neither Baghdad nor Damascus can be compared to the city, which lies here;
Surrounded by rivers, with its fortress of Takar, Yemen belongs to that city”*

5. Concluding Remarks:

These Madaris were equipped with up to date scientific equipment, observatories, laboratories and a vast collection of manuscripts, which recorded the deep experience of the past generations, a source of further inventions. Many large Masajid remains vacant round the year. Intellectuals should consider taking blessings from this ignored institution, as our predecessors did in the past, framing and designing the role of Masjid-Madrasah, according to the need of the present time. Through such magnificent Masajid, education can be provided free or subsidized. In each community and in each locality some spacious Masajid is available that can play a vital role in upgrading the rate of literacy. Traditionally, the goal of Madrasah is to produce a team who can interpret education of Islam in relation to the demands of the specific time. Through the modernization of the Madrasah institution, we can provide an opportunity for the upcoming generation to survive in the modern world better. The rate of literacy cannot improve by the hypocritical statements of our rulers. Nor reforms are possible through seminars and conferences. Such junk-activities benefit only the filthy-character bureaucrats. For the Renaissance of the Masjid-Madrasah, the role of philanthropist is indispensable.

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