

Central Madrasa Board Act Becomes Controversial

Madarsa Education

By S.G. HAQUE

Traditional Islamic seminaries imparting religious education have been, for one reason or another, a subject of debate and controversies for a few years across the globe, especially after the emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan. In India, the right wing political parties made much hue and cry, and inflammatory comments were passed regarding unprecedented growth of madrasas and their foreign funding. They did not hesitate to label these institutions as hubs of terrorism and claimed that many madrasas in the country are working with the Pakistani secret service agency, the ISI to destabilise India. They unsuccessfully tried to create an anti-madrasa atmosphere in the country, so that the centuries old madrasa system of education may get national consensus to be abolished.

While defending the allegations made against madrasas, the community leader denied involvement in any type of illegal activities and termed the move as communal approach of Hindutva groups to defame the community and its traditions. They argued that the madrasa plays a crucial role in the preservation of Islamic culture and values. They also alleged that the anti-Muslim elements are trying to harm the community by its pre-fabricated designs. They made it clear that these institutions are very useful in dissemination of knowledge and playing a vital role in achieving the goal of total literacy, as the madrasas cater to the educational needs of the very poor, downtrodden and mostly orphans. They also reminded the nation about the role of madrasas in national freedom struggle. However, the then six-year rule of the right wing BJP-led NDA government failed to substantiate its claim and could not identify a single madrasa involved in criminal or anti-national activities. During Vajpayee's tenure, the Muslim community did not hear any loud allegations against madrasas. But the NDA government under the premiership of Vajpayee closed the doors of Indian madrasas to foreign students and started a move to modernise the madrasas in India.

The successor of Vajpayee also paid an attention to the age old madrasa system of education and advocated the need of modernisation and the madrasa once again became an issue of debate. From parliamentarians to media and clerics to ordinary people, all are being seen involved in the discussion on the standardisation of madrasa education. It seems the madrasa and controversy are inseparable.

Everybody knows that Indian Muslims are one of the most backward and deprived communities. The development and Muslims are like South Pole and North Pole in the country. The socio-economic status of Indian Muslims is very disappointing and their backwardness is being seen as a big hurdle for India in becoming a developed nation and self reliant, as such the large number of Muslims cannot be overlooked. It is also a well known fact that the Muslims are one of the most educationally backward communities of India and it is also a big misconception that the education of Muslims revolves around the madrasas.

The present Congress-led UPA government took special initiative to modernise the age old curricula of the Islamic seminaries. In order to standardise, provide quality education and make the madrasa degrees more acceptable, the government proposed a national madrasa education authority namely, Central madrasa board on the pattern of Central board of secondary education. The Government proposed to promote education in non-theological subjects without interfering in the theological content and evaluation of Madrasa education. It was also proposed to arrange computers and other technical aids for teaching. Besides, there was an assurance regarding government support in providing salaries, necessary training to the madrasa employees and scholarships to Madrasa students.

The bill proposed to eradicate gender-based educational disparity by promoting education among Muslim girls. The Madrasa board also proposed to evaluate the curriculum framework once in five years with a view to make the Madrasa system of education a more effective tool for the educational empowerment of Muslims. The board took the task of preparation, publication or sale of textbooks and books, other than books on theology or religious texts, for use in affiliated Madrasas and provide, by regulations, after considering the recommendations of the Syllabus

Committee, if any, the curriculum, the syllabus, the courses of studies to be followed and books to be studied in affiliated Madrasas for examinations instituted by the Board.

The problem started here and the religious as well as political leadership started to smell something fishy in it. The standardisation move of the government became an issue of suspicion and community leaders see the creation of madrasa board as an indirect move of government interference in independent Islamic education system. The government is facing stiff resistance of community leadership on the issue.

The newly constituted National Commission for Minority Education Institutions has assured many times that the proposed madrasa board is an affiliating body and the affiliation to this board is voluntary only. The commission also made it very clear that it will be set up through an Act of Parliament and there is no question of state control. But the community leadership has put a big question: Why the government of India seems so serious to modernise madrasas, where only 4% of Muslim children get education and doing nothing for majority of Muslim children.

The government failed to win the confidence of Muslim parliamentarians on the issue. Even four of UPA government's five Muslim ministers chose to abstain from the meeting convened by the HRD minister to discuss the draft proposal of central madrasa board. Only one third of Muslim parliamentarians attended the meeting and failed to reach consensus. This depicts the attitude of the community's political leadership. Now the HRD minister has advised Muslim parliamentarians to draft an alternate proposal with necessary modifications. The HRD minister made it clear that in case the community is not in favour of the board, his ministry would withdraw the proposal.

Our Ulema proudly say that they provide Muezzins, Imams, Khateebes, Qazis and Muftis to the society through these madrasas, but they forget that these Islamic seminaries have produced administrators, scientists, judges, teachers, and great religious leaders as well.

Muslim intellectuals have continuously felt the need of madrasa modernisation and several organisations have made surveys of madrasas and organised seminars, symposia and workshops. Such need is felt strongly for a few years.

Today standardisation matters and quality control is the buzz word. Even the domain of education is not untouched with it. The Government of India commissioned a National accreditation and assessment council and made it mandatory for universities and institutions imparting higher education to get accredited and assessed. This organisation rates the institutions and ranks these institutions from one star to five stars. The NAAC also advises the institutions to take corrective measures, so that students may get quality education.

There is no official data regarding numbers of madrasas imparting religious education in the country, but several studies and surveys done by NGOs suggest their number between 20,000 to 30,000. Needless to say, madrasas are a vital part of an Islamic society, but the majority of madrasas lack even basic infrastructure. Trained teachers are not available in madrasas. The library is inadequate or does not exist. There is a wide gap in teacher and student ratio. Proper civic amenities are not available and their degrees are unrecognised.

The madrasa educated youths are considered unproductive on economic front as their degrees are not recognised and they are not accepted for employment. They get employment on a very small amount in Masjids and similar madrasas, which make their life miserable. Nobody can deny that the majority of madrasas in the country run on the hard earned money of community members, who donate a part of their earnings as fulfilment of religious obligations. Their donations fail to yield positive results, as the children passing out from these institutions remain unproductive and their economic status remains unchanged, which is not only injurious to the community's health but the society is paying a heavy price for the community's negligence towards its age old education system.

It is a fact that various Indian states like Assam, Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and U.P. have madrasa education boards and nobody has raised voice against government interference in the management and control of madrasas till date.

It is also a fact that the teachers employed in madrasas of state-run madrasa education board feel more comfortable than the unaffiliated and unaided madrasas. They get better salary and enjoy better working environment. The students get government recognised degrees and can pursue higher education in institutions imparting modern education and get employed in government jobs. These madrasas also produce Muezzins, Imams, Khateebes, Qazis and Muftis.

The apprehension of government intervention is totally baseless. If the Ulema of the country think on this line, let them think so. If Muslim parliamentarians, who are lawmakers, fear regarding state intervention in madrasa education system, it is not only surprising but regrettable also.

In our country, there is no law, which can compel a private institution to join the government run board or university. There are several institutions imparting professional education and they charge huge money as fees. These institutions have established themselves as a brand in the job market. The regulators of professional education cannot force them to get affiliated with a government-run university. So far as madrasas are concerned, they have constitutional support to run, administer and control under Articles 29 and 30.

Nobody can deny the importance of modern sciences especially social sciences. The madrasa graduates armed with Islamic values and modern scientific knowledge can better understand the world, social problems and challenges. They need not be the experts of so-called modern subjects, but they must have basic understanding of economics, geography, natural sciences and mathematics.

The pro-Board lobby is blaming that the people who are opposing the board are protecting their own interests. The majority of Islamic seminaries have hereditary character of management. Besides, most of our madrasas are financed by community members. The Muslim media often discusses malpractices in such madrasas and this issue of malpractices has always been a ground of local politics. This may be a cause of their opposition to the board. By involvement of a government agency in the madrasas, such type of malpractices may get exposed.

The Ulema of this country should have been thankful to the HRD ministry for providing a platform where people of different sects of Islam can come together for a common cause.

Now there is a billion dollar question: Why the community leadership wants to deprive the 4% students of getting quality education?

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