

The Central Madrasa Board: Should be or not be Constituted?

The madrasa as an ideological space has been, for one reason or another, in sharp focus for a few years. The present controversy regarding the establishment of the Central Madrasa Board has again provided an opportunity to re-articulate intricacies of the madrasa discourse anew.

The National Commission for Minority Education Institutions has been trying for some time to win the confidence of the Muslim community to constitute the Central Madrasa Board on the lines of CBSE or ICSE. In confidence building-gesture, Justice M.S.A. Siddiqui, Chairman of the NCMEI, has assured more than one time that affiliation to the proposed CMB will be voluntary. He has also stated that it will be set up through an Act of Parliament and will be free from all hues of the state control.

Despite all these assurances, Justice Siddiqui is encountering stiff resistance on the part of the ulama. It is seen as a potential channel through which the government seeks to interfere into the internal affairs of the madrasas. “We want the Government to leave the madrasas alone”, urged Kamal Faruqi, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board member. In the same vein, Maulana Marghubur Rehman Qasmi, Vice Chancellor of the Deoband madrasa, has also declared the CMB as “antithesis to the soul of the madrasas”. Moreover, he appealed all Indian madrasas not to be entrapped in this state noose. He was addressing a meeting of the Rabita Madaris-e-Arabia on December 4, held in the seminary town.

Reports of the ulama gatherings in all parts of the country and their condemning statements flooded the Urdu media for a period. A constant monitoring of the media reportage on the issue reveals a shift in the position of the ulama regarding their opposition to the CMB. Earlier they were unanimously opposed to it while towards the end of the last month, a number of ulama gradually started coming fore in its support. Consequently, it caused fissures in certain organizations. For example, All India Milli Council got divided on the issue: Maulana Abdullah Moghaisi, the President of the AIMC, opposed the CMB while Maulana Abdul Ahad Qasmi Tarapuri, the vice-President, came to openly join the pro-CMB camp. Interestingly, “a silent majority of the Muslim community” through letters to the editor in Urdu dailies like Qaumi Awaz and Rashtriya Sahara, both from Delhi, increasingly expressed their solidarity with pro-CMB ulama.

Those who have reservations about the setting up of the CMB, should give a thought to the fact that in a number of states, madrasa boards already exist for years. The madrasas affiliated them, never pointed out to even a semblance of action aimed at interfering in their internal affairs on the part of their respective boards. This writer has never come across a single alim who has refused to join a government-aided madrasa as the salary package in such madrasas is lucratively better. At present, it will be difficult to find out two madrasas offering same syllabus. On contrary, the CMB will pave the way for the uniformity of the madrasa curriculum, making it easy for the government universities to recognize the degrees of the madrasas. Moreover, it will reduce the dominance of the affluent people in the madrasa administration. There are instances that despite funded by the public donations, heredity happens to form the basis to inherit the administrative control of some big madrasas. The establishment of the CMB will definitely be problematic to this breed of the madrasa bosses.

Another major argument of those who are against the CMB is that the quality of the education in the state board affiliated madrasas is disturbingly appalling and, therefore, their graduates command less respect and reverence in the society. It goes without saying that the teaching staff, not the government, should to be blamed for this. Apart from all these, what worries the ulama is that through the CMB the government will be at a relatively better position to mount pressures to incorporate modern sciences in the core madrasas curriculum. Not only the conservative but some of the pro-reform ulama are also skeptical about the intention of the government regarding this particular issue.

During a fieldwork, I recently spent some time in the campus of Jameatul Hidayah, Jaipur. This madrasa is blazing a trail of reform in the domain of the madrasa curriculum as it trains its students in one of three professional trades (computer, mechanical and electrical), along with grooming them in the religious sciences. During interactions with its vice chancellor Maulana Ziyaur Rahim Mojaddidi, I learnt that the Jamea had a vision to come up with a campus as large as that of any government university. Though it has enough money to do so, the Rajasthan government does not let it go ahead with its plan. "If the government is not allowing the Jamea to construct buildings with its own money on its own land, how can one believe that it will spend money for the betterment of the madrasa community and that is too without any design?", asks Yunus Shamsi, a graduate of Jameatul Hidayah. He further asks why the government is so worried about the madrasas while only about 4 per cent of the Muslim children attend them. If the government really has political will for the educational uplift of the Muslims, it should, instead of politicizing the CMB controversy, concentrate on the rest of the 96 per cent Muslim children.

Along the line of reforms proposed in the CMB draft, the Teachers Association Madaris-e-Arabiya, UP, demanded that New Delhi should set up an Arabic university which should recognize the highest degree of madrasas affiliated to the state madrasa boards. It should be borne in the mind that acting on the recommendations of the Sanskrit Committee report, Sanskrit College, Varanasi has been raised in 1956 to the status of the Sanskrit University through Act no.28. Now, all Pathshalas of the country which offer a reformed syllabus, are linked to it and their degrees are considered equivalent to those of other government universities. Citing this experiment in the regime of Pathshala education, the TAMA has been pushing for the same kind of experiment in madrasas since its inception in 1972.

Reform in the madrasa curriculum and system is a must and setting up of the CMB or an Arabic university will definitely prove a big leap towards the same. It calls for strong political will and action on the part of the UPA government. Creating controversy on the issue betrays lack of the same determination on the part of the ruling alliance. More dangerously, it diverts the attention from the educational needs of the minus-madrasa Muslim civil society.