Propaganda Against Madrasah Education: A Process of Westernization and Modernization

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the negative portrayals of madrasah education in Muslim-majority countries, arguing that such representations are part of a larger effort to impose Western notions of progress. Tracing these narratives back to colonial times and exploring how they evolved post-9/11, the study contends that the drive to "modernize" madrasahs often undermines indigenous knowledge systems and cultural identity. Focusing on South Asia, the paper highlights how traditional Islamic education has adapted over time despite external pressure and propaganda.

Introduction

Madrasahs have historically served as vital centers for both religious and secular learning within the Islamic world (Zaman, 2002). Over the past two decades, however, they have come under increasing criticism, often framed as backward or linked to extremism. These narratives are not neutral but reflect a broader agenda of Westernization and the promotion of secular education as the only path to modernity. This paper argues that such portrayals are not only misleading but also harmful, as they delegitimize traditional educational institutions and weaken local cultural foundations.

Historical Overview of Madrasahs

Historically, madrasahs such as Al-Qarawiyyin and Al-Azhar were hubs for a wide range of subjects, from religious law to science and medicine (Berkey, 1992). In South Asia, institutions like Deoband maintained Islamic scholarship and community identity during colonial rule (Metcalf, 1982). Yet, colonial authorities, especially under British rule, saw these schools as outdated and incompatible with modern governance. They introduced Western-style schools, sidelining Islamic education and casting it as antiquated (Robinson, 2001).

Westernization and the Model of Modernity

Westernization often entails adopting European or American values, institutions, and lifestyles, while modernization is typically viewed as technological and social progress. These two concepts are frequently conflated in non-Western contexts (Eisenstadt, 2000). Education plays a major role in this dynamic. Modern schooling, with its emphasis on secularism and individualism, is often considered the gold standard, while religious education, especially Islamic, is painted as a hindrance to progress (Asad, 2003). This dichotomy has shaped public policy and educational reform in many Muslim countries.

The Impact of 9/11 on Madrasah Narratives

The attacks of September 11, 2001, brought global scrutiny to Islamic institutions, especially madrasahs in countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan. Western media and policy circles began linking these schools to radicalization, despite limited empirical evidence (Fair, 2008). Influential think tanks and global NGOs pushed for reforms, framing madrasah modernization as part of a global security strategy (ICG, 2002). These narratives often influenced domestic policy, particularly in aid-dependent states.

In Bangladesh, international donors supported state-led reforms of the Alia madrasah system, urging the addition of secular subjects (Asadullah&Chaudhury, 2010). However, these reforms often bypassed the communities they aimed to serve, overlooking the social and religious significance of these institutions.

A Closer Look at South Asia

Madrasahs in South Asia have fulfilled diverse roles: educational, religious, and political. Under British rule, they were not just centers of learning but also bastions of resistance (Metcalf, 1982). Post-independence, many secular governments distanced themselves from religious institutions, pushing madrasahs to the sidelines. In India, political rhetoric has sometimes portrayed madrasahs as separatist. In Pakistan, under pressure from foreign governments, policies were introduced to regulate religious schools, sparking backlash from religious leaders (ICG, 2002). In Bangladesh, the parallel systems of Alia and Qawmi madrasahs represent competing visions of education and identity.

Nevertheless, many madrasahs in the region have voluntarily included subjects like math, science, and computer skills in their syllabi, disproving the claim that they are unwilling to evolve (Hefner &Zaman, 2007).

Negative Effects of Madrasah Propaganda

The persistent negative framing of madrasahs has led to several significant issues:

1. **Cultural Disempowerment**: Constant criticism from media and policymakers leads communities to devalue their own educational traditions (Zaman, 2002).

2. **Educational Division**: An artificial split has developed where secular education is seen as progressive, while madrasah education is considered inferior, limiting social mobility for graduates (Asadullah&Chaudhury, 2010).

3. **Misguided Reforms**: Governments, responding more to international donors than local needs, have introduced reforms that lack cultural sensitivity and local legitimacy (Fair, 2008).

4. **Identity Conflict**: Students caught between traditional values and modern expectations often experience identity confusion and societal alienation (Zine, 2007).

Internal Reform and Resilience

Despite being targeted by negative narratives, many madrasahs are reforming from within. Scholars and educators within these institutions are working to modernize curricula by incorporating science, language, and vocational training while maintaining religious instruction. This approach reflects a desire to reform without abandoning cultural identity (Hefner &Zaman, 2007).

Bangladesh's recognition of Qawmi madrasah degrees as equivalent to formal master's degrees marks a significant policy shift that acknowledges their role in the national educational fabric (Uddin, 2021). Similar efforts in Pakistan and India show that many madrasahs are open to change, as long as reforms respect local traditions and values.

Conclusion

The portrayal of madrasahs as stagnant or threatening is deeply rooted in Western-centric notions of modernity. This propaganda not only distorts public perception but also leads to policies that marginalize traditional institutions. While reform is essential in any educational system, it should not come at the expense of cultural erasure.

Madrasahs have proven to be adaptive, resilient, and relevant. They should be treated as partners in educational development rather than problems to be solved. A balanced approach valuing both religious and secular knowledge can foster a more inclusive and culturally grounded education system.

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