Madrasa in Asia

YOGINDER SIKAND

Five papers presented at the workshop dealt with madrasas in South Asia, home to the largest concentration of Muslims in the world. Adil Mahdi, a doctoral student at the Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, spoke about the Indian madrasa and the spectre of “terrorism.” He argued that unlike the case of certain madrasas in Pakistan, not a single madrasa in India has been involved in “terrorist” activities. Numerous madrasas played a leading role in India’s freedom struggle. Yet, the Indian state and the media have mounted a relentless campaign to demonize the madrasas as “anti-national.” Mahdi also spoke about the Deoband’s links with the Taliban, arguing that although the two shared a common vision, they differed in matters of strategy. The rise of the Taliban to power, he stressed, owed less to their Deobandi ideology, than to political factors, including the support given to the Taliban by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the US.

Dietrich Reetz of the ZMO spoke about the changes in the Deobandi madrasa following its split in 1982. Countering the stereotype of Deobandi madrasas as hostile to change, he noted the reforms recently introduced at the Dar ul-Ulum, including the setting up of departments of English and computer applications. Regarding the Deobandis’ links with other groups, Reetz argued that the Deobandi ulama were more concerned with countering other Muslim groups than with non-Muslim communities. He also spoke of the efforts of some Deobandis in promoting dialogue with Hindus.

Girls’ madrasas in contemporary India are a fairly recent development. Mareike Winkelmann of ISIM dealt with the case of a Deobandi girls’ madrasa in Delhi, showing how, by providing free education that was also culturally relevant, such madrasas are playing an important role in promoting literacy among girls from poor families. Although its curriculum is conservative in terms of its vision of gender relations, the madrasa affords new spaces for Muslim girls, including involvement in the reformist Tablighi Jamaat, arguably the largest Muslim movement in the world today.

Farish Noor’s paper dealt with the case of over a dozen Indonesian and Malaysian students at two madrasas in Karachi, Pakistan, who were recently deported to their countries and arrested on charges of being involved with “terrorist” groups. These students have been denied a fair trial by their governments, who, Noor claimed, appear to have joined hands with the US to clamp down on dissenting Islamic movements, branding them all as “terrorists.” This must be seen in the context of the complex links between the US and governments in Muslim countries allied to it, for both of whom the talk of madrasas as “dens of terror” has come in handy to clamp down on internal opposition. The “anti-terrorism” campaign one of whose by-products is the military attack on Islam in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere.

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Yoginder Sikand’s paper focused on efforts being made today by ulama and Muslim activists in India to introduce modern subjects in the curriculum, excise subjects and books that are considered irrelevant, and introduce reforms in teaching methods.

Noorhaidi Hasan of the Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, dealt with the Salafi or “Wahhabi” madrasas in contemporary Indonesia. He traced the evolution of the Salafis in Indonesia and their adversarial relations with the Shafi’i ulama, Suﬁs, and abangan, or “lax” Muslims. He noted that some Salafis have been receiving generous support from Saudi Arabia, linking this to the Saudis’ broader goal, which they shared with the US, of promoting a conservative, status quo, literalist Islam to counter anti-monarchical tendencies in Muslim countries. He also spoke of the efforts of some Salafis in Indonesia to introduce modern subjects in the curriculum, excise subjects and books that are considered irrelevant, and introduce reforms in teaching methods.

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Christine Huenner of the University of Bochum, Germany, dealt with madrasas in South Asia, home to the largest concentration of Muslims in the world. Adil Mahdi, a doctoral student at the Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, spoke about the Indian madrasa and the spectre of “terrorism.” He argued that unlike the case of certain madrasas in Pakistan, not a single madrasa in India has been involved in “terrorist” activities. Numerous madrasas played a leading role in India’s freedom struggle. Yet, the Indian state and the media have mounted a relentless campaign to demonize the madrasas as “anti-national.” Mahdi also spoke about the Deoband’s links with the Taliban, arguing that although the two shared a common vision, they differed in matters of strategy. The rise of the Taliban to power, he stressed, owed less to their Deobandi ideology, than to political factors, including the support given to the Taliban by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the US.

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