

## MADRASSA-MILITANCY CONTROVERSY IN PAKISTAN: WHAT THE STAKEHOLDERS THINK?

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**ABSTRACT:** *Madrassa militancy controversy in Pakistan has been a topic of hot debates in recent years. Some scholars discuss madrassa as a source of radical ideology and a security threat to the modern world. Some others think it as a net of social security services for underprivileged strata of the society. What is the position of real stakeholders of madrassa, this is the core objective of this paper to explore it. This paper is based on the data acquired by twenty in-depth interview of madrassa teachers belonging to different sects in Gujranwala. The study found no sect-based variation in responses; however, the opinion of respondents on the issue of madrassa-militancy correlation was divided into diverse dimensions. Almost all the respondents were found poignant on allegation of producing militants. They deem it an international agenda to denuclearize Pakistan by crafting the issue of madrassa militancy. They perceive 'capitalism' behind the conspiracy against madrassa. They also see this phenomenon in scriptural frame of reference.*

**KEY WORDS:** Pakistan; Madrassa; Militancy; Politics; Jihad

**INTRODUCTION:** Madrassa is under strict scrutiny since last many years. Scholars and academician across the globe have been curious to understand the actual functioning of madrassa. Presently, some scholars understood madrassas as *jihad* factories having less to do with education and more to do with political indoctrination; incubators of Muslim terrorists; origins of conservative violent ideologies, and thus, a security threat to the modern. However, there are also some scholars who think madrassa playing peaceful roles in society; like, increasing literacy rate, spreading religious morality and human values, giving space to marginalized class of society, discourage criminality, and thus, maintain a social order [1].

Madrassa, historically, had played a central role in serving society and state for centuries. For society, it has been instrumental in preserving, sustaining and transmitting Islamic tradition over the generations. Muslim states had also been relying on madrassas in acquiring human resource to run government machinery, and to seek political legitimization [2].

Since, educational sites across the world has been centrally involved in propagation, selective dissemination, and social appropriation of the discourse: therefore, the ruling elite in Muslim countries have been actively engaged with official functions within madrassas, like appointments of teachers, recruitment of students, and orientation of curriculum [3].

Financial patronage was also one of the primary tools to maintain state's control over this institution: the ultimate goal was to control religious scholars, and through them, to the masses [4]. In this regard, madrassa was also a source of legitimization of power structure of society [5].

In the recent past, the event of 9/11, 2001, in United States, raised a high degree of controversy on institutional functioning of madrassa. Political activism and transnational linkages of madrassa were widely asserted in a number of studies [6, 7, 8]. The centuries-old institution of Islamic learning was projected as political entity, rather than a social entity [9], and thus, madrassa was largely misperceived [10].

However, it is a matter of fact that Pakistani madrassas have perceived connections with transnational Islamic militants,

who are responsible for precipitate violence and terrorism in the name of religion, and thus, cause a global social disorder [11]. Particularly, after the fall of Taliban in Afghanistan, madrassas in Pakistan have been considered supporting Taliban in many ways; like providing them sanctuary, and training of new recruits [12].

Pakistan, at state level, have been trying to deal with Islamic militancy by encountering militants militarily as short-term measure, and introducing reforms in madrassa system as long-term measure. United States paid money to government of Pakistan for introducing reforms in madrassas system, and thus, to eliminate the perceived element of militancy from madrassa education [13, 14].

However, the issue is still unresolved. There is a state of mistrust between the government and the madrassa establishment. The government had also offered financial and technical assistance to madrassas for their better functioning: but clerics perceived it a cost of their sovereignty, and thus, generally refused to accept it [15].

Madrassa issue has various dimensions. Some scholars think that connecting madrassa with religious militancy or terrorism is actually a political game of the West. For example, Bergen and Pandey have referred five major events of the terrorist attacks in the world, and argued that all masterminds behind these events were university graduates who had no concern with madrassa [16]. They also put question on 9/11 Commission's final report that it had linked madrassa to terrorism without giving any evidence. They argued that the report did not mention which one from 19 hijackers had attended madrassa. Similarly, Ruban quoted by Khalid has referred assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and the murder of American journalist Denial Pearl, and argued that none of the offender was madrassa graduate [17].

This confusion on the role of madrassa has been felt not only by scholars, but has disturbed general public as well. This, actually, suggested the researcher to investigate the opinion of real stakeholders of madrassa regarding this ongoing controversy. Considering the teachers of madrassas as real stakeholders of this institution, this study is based on in-depth

interviews of 20 madrassa teachers by using an interviewing guide.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

This paper is based on interviews of twenty (20) teachers of different madrassas in Gujranwala. Gujranwala is a big city and the divisional headquarter for six districts of Punjab province of Pakistan. Madrassas in Gujranwala are divided into four categories based on religious sects: *ahl-e hadith*, *brailvi*, *deobandi*, and *Shia*. In order to ensure representation of all these sects in the sample, two madrassas from each category were included in the study. From each madrassa, two or three madrassa teachers were selected as respondents. In this study, 'madrassa teacher' means a person with religious education, currently teaching in a madrassa on a regular basis.

The potential respondents were contacted at their work place with due permission of madrassa administrators. They were informed about this study and its objectives. Then they were asked to participate in study. Among the willing teachers, two or three were randomly selected as participants of study. They were provided a written code of ethics, in Urdu version, explaining the rights of research-participants. The willingness of each individual participant regarding to take part in the study was obtained in writing prior to the conduct of the interview session.

The study used a list of points to guide the process of interview for exploring participants' perception regarding the allegation of madrassa militancy correlation. The discussions were held in Urdu, the first language of the respondents. With the prior approval of madrassa administration, as well as respondents, the interviews were audio-recorded and written notices were taken. The physical environment was kept comfortable, neutral, private, and interruption-free. For the purpose to eliminate the psychological barriers, the respondents were made to realize that their opinion was too valuable. However, the reaction of researcher against the responses of participants was value-neutral; and nonaligned sentences were used for probing, like, can you explain further, would you explain what you mean, would you describe with some example, etc.

### **Participants Characteristics**

All the twenty madrassa teachers, who participated in research, were male. Their age ranged from 30 to 55 years. All were married. The time they had been serving at madrassa as teachers was ranged from 5 to 28 years. On the average, they had spent 8 years on getting religious education before teaching. They had also mainstream educational certificates ranged from Matric to Masters. All these participants got mainstream education as private students.

### **Data Analysis**

All the audio recorded qualitative data acquired from madrassa teachers, in Urdu language, were analyzed, classified and transcribed into English language (the researcher is equally comfortable in Urdu and English). The initial write-up of the results was also shared with respondents of research to check the validity of data. They confirmed it, and showed no reservation in this regard.

### **FINDINGS:**

This study focussed on the perceptions of real stake holders of madrassa system in Pakistan. The question, why madrassa was an issue and why there were numerous events of military attacks on madrassas, was responded by the respondents with great concern. All the respondents were unanimously disagreed with the perception that madrassa was a genuine issue. Rather, they think that it was a political construction of the problem by the Westerns that madrassa seemed an issue. Why madrassa was chosen by Westerns to make it an issue: on this point, the opinion of respondents was divided into different dimensions. The main themes emerged in this regard were as follows:

#### **Socioeconomic system of Islam: a perceived potential threat to Western Capitalistic system:**

Some respondents argued that socioeconomic system of Islam was a perceived potential threat to the Western capitalist system, after the demise of Socialism. They suspected that since "Islam was studied in madrassas; therefore, propaganda was also against madrassas". "The ultimate goal of this propaganda is to eradicate, or at least to modify, the spirit of Islamic education in a way that suits to the West" they asserted.

#### **Scriptural frame of reference:**

Some respondents elucidated the issue of madrassa in scriptural frame of reference. They referred certain verses of Quran and translated as "Christians and Jews can never be the friends of Muslims". They related it to the crises in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, Lebanon, Bosnia and Kashmir; and argued, "Christians and Jews has adopted anti-Muslim policies everywhere; and thus, the current campaign against madrassa is also an extension of their historic enmity against Islam and Muslims".

#### **Nuclear capability of Pakistan:**

Some respondents made relationship between nuclear capability of Pakistan and political construction of the issue of madrassa-militancy. They think that Western powers want to denuclearize Pakistan, or, at least, to take control of its strategic assets into their own hands. For this purpose, as a modern warfare tactics, the Westerns have created an issue of Islamic militancy: like "Islamist can get access over Pakistan's nuclear weapons to misuse them against the West". They argued, "since madrassa is the only institution that produces Islamists: therefore, it is specifically under the Western plot".

There were also some respondents who expressed a unique understanding why the Westerns want to rollback Pakistan's nuclear capability, and how madrassa is relevant in this regard:

*Economic pulse of United States is in hands of Jews, who are working on the plan to establish Greater Israel in the Middle East. For that, Israel will have to fight a great-war with Arabs, in future. At that time, Pakistan, being a Muslim state, can help Arabs by virtue of its nuclear technology. Therefore, as a precautionary measure, Jews are instrumentally using the influence of US to rollback Pakistan's nuclear advancement. In this regard, madrassa is just a scapegoat.*

**Coordinated effort to present madrassa as an issue:**

Most of the respondents perceived that a coordinated campaign has been launched to present madrassa as an issue: “Western politicians, security agencies, research scholars, academicians, and mass media: all are participating”. The respondents also supposed that some Muslim scholars, even from Pakistan, had also been paid to write against madrassas. And “under the influence of this whole campaign, the image of madrassa has been distorted: and its peaceful role has become controversial”.

**Relationship of madrassa with Taliban movement:**

Many of the respondents stressed that the relationship between madrassa and Taliban movement has been spuriously established. They considered Taliban movement as a resistance struggle against American oppression in Afghanistan. They argued that “if American forces throw bombs and missiles on to the Pashtoon population inside Pakistan, ultimately the victims may have resentment, and can join hands with Taliban. In this context, madrassa has no role to make them militant Taliban”.

**Education in madrassa in contrast of allegations on madrassa:**

Many respondents referred to the type of education taught in madrassas. They expressed, “students learn Islam in madrassas: and Islam declares ‘human life’ as the most precious and sacred thing on the earth”. They referred the saying of the prophet, “taking of one innocent human life is equal to killing of all mankind; and saving of one human life means saving of all mankind”. They argued, “similar to homicide, suicide is also haram (prohibited) in Islam: and in this context, it is irrational to think that madrassa students can become terrorists or suicide attackers to take innocent lives”. They declared madrassa students as “the most law-abiding citizens of the state”.

**The ideology, that madrassa inculcates in students:**

The respondents highlighted that madrassa inculcates a specific ideology to its students. That is “supreme power is Allah: Muslims should trust in Allah: and do not fear except Allah”. They argued,

*Such an ideology does not suit to the ideals of the Western powers because it gives valour to Muslims not to fear from infidels and stand firmly in front of them. This ideology is a psychological challenge for Western technological hegemony. Otherwise, the madrassa students are the most peaceful and contented youth that never indulges in any kind of anti-social activity, like, strikes, protests, and vandalism: that school/college students often do.*

**Roots of terrorism in economic depression, not in Islamic education:**

Almost all the respondents had consensus on the view that terrorism or militancy in the world was not due to the Islamic education of madrassa; rather, economic depression and social injustice in the world played a vital role behind this phenomenon. They think that the poor people, who intend to commit suicide under economic and mental stress, can get

involve in suicidal terrorist attacks for the sake of monetary benefit for their family. “Certain poor people can be bought as a commodity to be used instrumentally by international players” they argued.

**DISCUSSION:**

‘Madrassa’ had been an ordinary topic for researchers before Afghan-Russia war 1980s. The prior studies have been, generally, focused on educational aspects of madrassa; like, its validity and compatibility with general market economy. Or, some scholars also have been interested in historical functioning of madrassa; like, how Muslim rulers have been taking legitimacy for their rule, from this institution. In this regard, there was no heated debate on the topic of madrassa; and it was just as usual as other topics of social research.

However, the trends changed in 1980s when the students and teachers from some Pakistani madrassas got involved in the war against Soviet invaders in Afghanistan. As a result of this long war, Soviet forces had to retreat from Afghanistan. After their retreat, the role of madrassa students in Afghanistan, apparently, could have been ended-up. However, the subsequent post-war developments in Afghanistan again welcomed their role in the country.

In fact, the Soviet forces had receded from Afghanistan without handing over power to some representative body in Afghanistan. Consequently, Afghan war-lords started to fight with one another; and each one was trying to take control of the state in own hands. This situation pushed Afghanistan into a new era of violence and anarchy; and practically, Afghan society became a lawless and stateless society.

Again, madrassa students (Taliban) came forward with the claim to inflict peace and order in Afghanistan. They rose-up suddenly, defeated warlords quickly, and established their own government harshly. They ensured the writ of the state in most parts of Afghanistan. These developments in Afghanistan, in which Pakistani madrassas played an unconventional role, attracted the attention of world scholarship to understand the latent potential of madrassa institution.

Then, a terrorist event of 9/11, 2001 occurred in United States, that caused three thousand casualties with billions dollars lose. The clue of this event went to *Al-Qaeda* leadership, which was in harbouring of Afghan government \_the Taliban. The Taliban authorities refused to hand over the accused people to Americans, without proper evidencing. Finally, US forces along with their allies NATO forces assailed, destroyed, and captured Afghanistan.

The spiral history repeated itself. Now, the war of Afghanistan was to expel out Americans. However, American had also past experience of 1980s that Pakistani madrassas had potential to prepare holy warriors against the foreign invaders in Afghanistan. Therefore, they specially targeted Pakistani madrassas by different ways; like, drown bombing on madrassas, and mass media campaign against madrassas to form a public opinion. By this way, the topic of madrassa became hub of international scholarship.

In this regard, post 9/11 studies contributed in making the role of madrassas institution as controversial. Normally, these studies used the data of few madrassas, and generalized

it over the whole madrassa system in Pakistan. The scientific sampling, which is the back bone of sociological studies, is usually ignored in these studies. Madrassa has been shown a source of religious violence and extremism.

Consequently, under the perception that madrassas were indoctrinating terrorist philosophy in youth, Pakistani secret agencies and law enforcement organizations put close surveillance on the activities of madrassas. This surveillance perturbed and irritated madrassa establishment. This irritation was explicitly palpable in the attitude of clergy, during the course of data collection. For instance, when I went in a madrassa and introduced myself and purpose of my visit: the administrator did not believe, and replied, "You are the 11<sup>th</sup> official who came here for search-out and information collection. Ok, fine, go inside and see what we are doing: and inform your Western masters."

Similarly, the principal and teachers of another madrassa gave me warning to move away from their madrassa within the given five minutes. They perceived me as collecting information with evil intention (to provide these data to the Westerns). The best effort was made to ensure madrassa principal that the information would be used in just an academic research; but, he was not ready to trust on me. Then I tried to interact with some of the students and teachers outside the madrassa. But they were already embarrassed, and did not cooperate: rather, they humiliated me.

Consistently, the owner of another famous and big madrassa was also felt wounded and annoyed. He told an interesting story behind his annoyance:

*A few months back, some foreign researchers visited our madrassa and conducted our interviews. They also took some photographs of the madrassa, including its main-gate, on which the name of madrassa has been written. They told us that their research would wash out misconceptions regarding the role of Pakistani madrassas. We cooperated with them to the best we could do. But, just after two months, one of my friends in America informed me on telephone that he had seen a magazine there. On the title page of this magazine, the main-gate of our madrassa was shown, under which four face-hided young men in commando dressing with guns were standing. And the caption was given: 'Al-Jihad, Al-Jihad'.*

This state of affairs, where indicates gravity of the problem, there it also puts question on the professional research ethics being practiced by some scholars in dealing with the topics related to Islam and conflict.

### CONCLUSIONS:

This study helps to understand the perceptions of madrassa teachers regarding an ongoing controversy on madrassa militancy correlation in Pakistan. Madrassa teachers are the real stakeholders of madrassa system in Pakistan. They have been studying in madrassas: teaching in madrassas: and administrator of madrassas. Apparently, madrassa system

revolves around madrassa teachers. Therefore, their opinion on the functioning of this institution is worthwhile.

This study found a consensus of perceptions among madrassa teachers on the point that madrassa was not a genuine issue: rather it was a created illusion. The majority of respondents perceive that the issue of madrassa had been politically constructed by the Westerns: and underlying factors behind controversy were 'Pakistan's nuclear capability', 'socioeconomic system of Islam', 'historical rivalry of Jews and Christians against Muslims' and 'conservative ideology of madrassa'. These perceptions of madrassa teachers were found in the line of assertions of some previous studies [18,19,20,21,22].

It was noted that madrassa came under limelight because of some Taliban's association with Pakistani madrassas on account of their studies. Several war-affected Afghan-families shifted to Pakistan, and mostly their children studied in madrassas. Some of these children, at latter stage, joined the Taliban movement against American forces. This has created suspicions on madrassa's education, and its social role. The same understanding has also been described in some other studies [23,24,25].

Madrassa teachers mentioned that curriculum of madrassa was still same, across Pakistan, as it had been in the past when there was no allegation on madrassa for creating militants. This indicates that despite a lucid connection between madrassa and Taliban, it cannot be safely predicted that institutional role of madrassa is to create militants. Moreover, technically, madrassa is unable to produce terrorists in modern era of science and technology; because it is still stuck on religious training. Same has also been pointed out by some studies [26].

Some previous studies had shown madrassa as a safety valve or social security net in society [27, 28,29]. They argued that madrassa accommodates marginalized population with food, shelter, education, clothes, medical cover and employment. Since, madrassa also morally trains the youth to avoid sin and crime: therefore it contributes in the culmination of social causes of criminality, like economic factor and moral decay. In the present study, same was the perception of madrassa teachers also. They perceived them helping the state and the society by producing more prosocial individuals under religious influences; and thus to maintain a social order. Politically, the respondents were charged. Majority perceived it justified if Afghan students, who were studying in Pakistani madrassas, join Taliban's resistance movement against the usurpers of their homeland. They also assume the policies of transnational powers as contributory factor behind the problems of the Muslim world. They deem transnational coalitions of non-Muslim states as hatching conspiracies against Muslims. Some previous studies have also mentioned the same [30, 31, 32, 33, 34].

The discussions with madrassa teachers explored three main factors that could facilitate the West in establishing controversy on madrassa. One, the presence of Afghan students in Pakistani madrassas creates suspicions regarding madrassa education because some of them, subsequently, join resistance movement in their homeland. Two, former ruling military establishment in Pakistan purposely created an issue

of Islamic militancy to seek political favour from the West for its aristocratic rule. Three, transnational powers “hatch conspiracies against a Muslim nuclear state, and pose a threat of madrassa-military correlation as part of the big game of destabilizing Pakistan”. The perception of madrassa teachers that the root of terrorism lies in economic depression and social injustice: not in religious education, in fact, suggests another independent research in this area.

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