

ISLAMIC EDUCATION

THE MADRASA MOVEMENT
A Peaceful Revolution in Education



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INTRODUCTION

The first time I visited a large *madrasa* (Islamic seminary), I was struck by its presence, and spontaneously uttered, “*Madinat al-‘Ilm*,” which means “*city of knowledge*.” Every *madrasa* is essentially a city of knowledge, with only the distinction being that some are larger cities while others are smaller.

During the early period of Islam, when Muslims spread across various countries, they established such cities of knowledge wherever they went. This was a new chapter in history. In ancient times, large structures were generally built either as massive temples, palaces, forts, or tombs. The concept of educational institutions, in the modern sense, did not exist in ancient times. A Western scholar has rightly noted that the idea of universal education and hundred percent literacy was introduced to history for the first time by Muslims.

Where did this intellectual inclination among Muslims come from? It was directly a result of the Quran. If the Quran is read with an open mind, it becomes evident that the Quran emphasizes knowledge, education, and learning more than anything else. It can be stated without exaggeration that the Quran was the first book to break knowledge out of a restricted sphere and introduce humanity to the concept of mass education.

The Prophet of Islam, peace be upon him, was born in 570 CE in the city of Mecca in Arabia. The first revelation descended upon him in 610 CE while he was in the Cave of Hira. The first word of that revelation was *Iqra* (Read). It is narrated that the angel Gabriel came to the Prophet and said, *Iqra* (Read). The Prophet responded, *Ma ana biqari* (I am not able to read) (*Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith No. 3). Gabriel repeated *Iqra* a second time, and the Prophet again said, *Ma ana biqari*. Gabriel said it a third time, after which the Prophet recited the words of Chapter 96, Surah Al-‘Alaq, the verses that Gabriel had brought as the first revelation.

Reflect on this initial incident of revelation. The Prophet of Islam was undeniably unlettered. Despite this, why did God’s angel insist repeatedly, saying, *Iqra* (Read)? This indicates that even if you do not know how to read, you should strive to read; even if you do not know how to write, you should endeavour to write. In this sense, Islamic culture can be described as synonymous with *Iqra* culture.

This was an extremely revolutionary teaching that was granted to the Prophet of Islam, peace be upon him, and indirectly to his followers, at the very beginning of his prophethood. As a result, the pursuit of knowledge became a permanent aspect of his followers’ activities. The practice of reading and writing grew so extensively that a time came when Muslims became the teachers of all other nations.

When the Muslims ventured out of Arabia and spread to various parts of the world, they made reading and teaching their special mission everywhere they went.

This movement began in Mecca, reached Medina, then Damascus, and subsequently centered in Baghdad and Cairo. Later, it entered Cordoba and Granada, from where it spread further to the entire world. During this era, all cities in the Muslim world became centers of education and learning.

The influence of this intellectual inclination among Muslims was such that when their caravans entered the Indian subcontinent, they established numerous madrasas and educational institutions, both individually and collectively. It would be accurate to say that the widespread dissemination of knowledge in the subcontinent occurred for the first time through Muslims. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged this in his book *The Discovery of India*, stating that the Arab Muslims brought a brilliant culture to India. (*The Discovery of India*, 1994, p. 231)

However, in the first half of the 19th century, as British dominance in the Indian subcontinent increased, the decline of Muslim educational institutions began. This was primarily because the initial political resistance against the British was largely led by Islamic scholars. This led the British to perceive Islamic madrasas as intellectual centers of anti-British movements. Consequently, they became hostile toward these institutions and attempted to suppress them in various ways. For example, they confiscated the endowments and land grants that supported these madrasas, cutting off their resources. Many scholars were arrested, and so on. As a result, a large number of madrasas across the country were forced to shut down.

After the British established political control over India, Muslim leaders spent a significant amount of time believing that their first priority should be to expel the British from the country. Only then, they thought, would there be an opportunity to resume religious efforts in the nation. The armed uprising of 1857 was a result of this line of thinking, but it failed to achieve its objective.

After this experience, the scholars realized that armed confrontation with the British was practically futile. The only viable course of action now was to abandon the path of conflict and instead focus on constructive work through peaceful means. From an Islamic perspective, they identified this work as the pursuit of knowledge and education. Consequently, the scholars decided to redirect all their energy toward educating the nation, leaving behind the approach of confrontation with the British.

Under this new mindset, the movement for madrasas spread across the Indian subcontinent in the latter half of the 19th century. Both internal and external circumstances became increasingly favourable for this effort, and over time, the madrasa movement expanded to the point where it has now become a movement for revolution.

Since an early age, I have been closely associated with scholars and the madrasa movement. My father passed away in 1929 when I was still a child. As a result, my cousin, Maulana Iqbal Ahmed Khan Suhail, an advocate with an M.A. and LL.B., became my familial guardian. He was highly intelligent, well-educated, and held great respect for scholars.

During the pre-partition era, the controversy surrounding the Two-Nation Theory arose. In response, Maulana Hussain Ahmed Madani stated in 1937, "In modern times, nations are formed by homelands."

At the time, advocate Iqbal Ahmed Suhail, composed a reasoned response in the form of a Persian poem, two verses of which were:

Translation:

*Turn to Deoband if you seek salvation, For the demon
of the self, unruly and naive, is your enemy.*

*Follow the path of Hussain Ahmed if you seek God,
For he is the heir of the Prophet and from the Prophet's
lineage.*

It was my cousin, Maulana Iqbal Ahmed Suhail, who gave me my first conscious thought about life. Thus, even in my youth, I was connected with scholars and the madrasa movement, a connection that has never been severed.

I have maintained a continuous relationship with the world of madrasas. My education also took place in a madrasa. I have regularly interacted with individuals associated with madrasas and frequently participated in madrasa gatherings and programs. However, I had not yet written formally about madrasas. While some of my miscellaneous writings on this topic had been published, I had not compiled a comprehensive book on the subject.

Scholars associated with various madrasas often urged me to write a book or a detailed article about madrasas, but I had not been able to undertake this task. Finally, in May 2000,

everything fell into place and I was able to complete this essay, which forms the book ‘Deen-o-Shariat’ published in 2002, pp. 73-160..

On May 9, 2000, I received an invitation from *Tanzeem Abnaa-e-Qadeem Darul Uloom Deoband*. The invitation informed me of an international gathering titled “*Al-Imam Muhammad Qasim Al-Nanautawi Seminar*”, scheduled to take place in New Delhi from May 20-22, 2000. The organizers invited me to participate in the opening session as a guest of honour and to deliver a speech on the “*Madrassa Movement in India*”.

Subsequently, several scholars from Delhi, such as Maulana ‘Ameed uz-Zaman Kairanwi, Maulana Muhammad Mazammil Haq Al-Husseini, Maulana Badr uz-Zaman Qasmi, and Maulana Waris Mazhari Qasmi, among others, met with me. They specifically emphasized the importance of this work. Motivated by their encouragement, I finally made the decision to undertake the task, began my study, and started writing on the subject.

The speech I initially prepared to present at the mentioned seminar was only 10 pages long. However, as I conducted further research on the topic, it continued to expand, eventually resulting in this 80-page essay.

Wahiuddin Khan
New Delhi

HISTORY OF EDUCATION

In modern times, extensive research has been conducted on the history of education, and numerous books have been written on the subject. This research reveals that Islam has made a significant contribution to the history of education. For the first time in recorded history, Islam brought knowledge and education from a limited sphere to a broader, more inclusive realm.

Islam emerged in the first quarter of the 7th century CE. Before Islam, knowledge was confined to an elite circle. However, following the revolution brought about under Islam, history witnessed for the first time the transition of knowledge from the elite to the general public. This revolutionary movement of expanding education is what is referred to as the madrasa system in the history of education.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1984) includes a detailed 92-page article on the *History of Education*, prepared by several education experts. In this article, the history of education is divided into several periods. According to it, the first period is termed *Primitive Culture*. During this early era, the primary objective of education was to familiarize the new generation with tribal traditions and ethics and prepare them accordingly. At that time, the practice of reading and

writing was extremely limited. Hence, tribal education was mostly oral, and young individuals were made to memorize teachings to preserve them.

Furthermore, this education was not accessible to the entire tribe but was limited to the elite class. This elite class primarily consisted of two groups: tribal leaders, nobles, and their youth from the upper class, and the priestly class, which assisted people in performing religious rituals and ceremonies. Ordinary individuals were excluded from this educational system (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 6, pp. 317-18).

According to this, the second era is referred to as the *Classical Culture* period, or the ancient historical era. During this time, literacy had significantly increased. However, as far as education was concerned, the general pattern remained largely the same as in the earlier period. Along with informal education, formal education also began to emerge. However, this education remained primarily restricted to the elite and higher castes.

The higher caste or elite class was considered to consist of two groups:

1. The leaders and nobles who were the political heads of tribes or nations and were responsible for governance.
2. The priestly class who performed religious rituals, managed places of worship, and conducted other family or social ceremonies, such as marriages, in accordance with religious principles.

Education was not considered necessary for anyone outside these religious and political elite classes.

In some societies, there is evidence of education for the common people. However, this education was not truly aimed at acquiring knowledge. Rather, it was intended to meet practical societal needs. Its purpose was to ensure that people understood social traditions, so they could remain loyal to the established order and prevent societal disorder. It was primarily focused on teaching the masses how to live under the authority of the upper classes (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 6, pp. 319-320).

The third era begins after this, which can truly be considered the era of learning and teaching in the real sense. This era primarily started after the Islamic revolution. The essential condition required for the beginning of this new era was the elimination of discrimination between human beings, and this became possible only after the advent of Islam.

Before Islam, humanity was divided into two classes: the upper class (elite) and the lower class (inferior), or the superior race and the inferior race. For instance, in China, the emperor was called the *Son of Heaven*. In India, it was believed that certain people belonged to the higher caste, born from the head of Brahma, while others were progressively considered inferior based on being born from his lower body parts. Similar divisions existed in other nations and regions.

It was Islam that first abolished this division and discrimination among human beings. This fact is widely

acknowledged by historians. When Islam broke these barriers, it became possible for education to move beyond the exclusive realm of the elite and become accessible to the general public, making it attainable for all humans.

This transformation began with the concept of worship. Before Islam, worship was understood as an act that did not occur directly between God and an individual but was mediated through an intermediary. Because of this division, religious knowledge was considered necessary only for the priest who performed the intermediary role in completing the rituals of worship. This division confined literacy to the priestly class, leaving the general public detached from it.

For the first time, Islam established worship as a direct act between an individual and God. This made reading and writing a personal necessity for every person. After embracing Islam, individuals began to read and memorize the Quran so they could recite it during their daily prayers. The practice of writing and reading also began to preserve prayers and other supplications. Similarly, Islam introduced reforms in other aspects of life, naturally eliminating the division between the elite and the common people.

Among human beings, apparent differences exist—such as differences in colour, abilities, and social status. In ancient times, these differences were interpreted to mean that some people were inherently superior and others inferior. Islam abolished this discriminatory notion and explicitly declared:

“Mankind! We have created you from a male and

female, and made you into peoples and tribes, so that you might come to know each other. The noblest of you in God's sight is the one who fears God most. God is all knowing and all-aware." (*Quran*, 49:13)

This concept is also expressed in various ways in the Hadith. For example, the Prophet of Islam said:

"I bear witness that all servants (of God) are brothers to one another." (*Sunan Abi Dawood*, Hadith No. 1508)

He also said: "All people are the children of Adam, and God created Adam from dust." (*Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith No. 3270)

Similarly, he stated: "Listen, no Arab has superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have superiority over an Arab; neither does a red-skinned person have superiority over a black-skinned person, nor does a black-skinned person have superiority over a red-skinned person—except by piety." (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 23489)

This declaration of human equality was not merely a proclamation but a manifesto for a real, practical revolution. With Allah's special help, the Prophet of Islam and his companions were given the opportunity not only to announce the principles of human equality and brotherhood but also to establish them practically over vast territories by bringing about a revolution. Researchers generally agree that the first practical system of human equality was established in history through Islam.

In ancient times, knowledge and education were largely confined to the elite due to prevailing inequalities among human beings. When inequality was eradicated and an era of human equality began, the conditions naturally arose for knowledge and education to extend beyond specific groups and spread to all sections of humanity. This is precisely what happened after the Islamic revolution.

Before Islam, the ancient era everywhere was characterized by systems of monarchy. A few individuals enjoyed absolute rulership, while the rest were merely subjects living under their authority. This politically discriminatory system restricted knowledge and education to the elite and rulers, leaving no role for the general population.

Islam, in contrast to this authoritarian system, introduced the concept of democratic consultation (*Quran*, 42:38) and established it in practice. Historians have acknowledged that the downfall of ancient monarchies was made possible through the Islamic revolution. For example, the French historian Henri Pirenne wrote that if Islam had not dismantled the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, the era of political autocracy might never have ended.

It is a historical fact that the collapse of the ancient monarchical system and its replacement with an era of democracy or popular governance only became possible after the Islamic revolution. This revolution had various social outcomes in history, one of which was the elimination of the division between the elite and the common people. Naturally, as a result, the practice of reading and writing

spread among all of humanity, which had previously been restricted to the elite.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1984) notes that after the emergence of Islam, there was a large-scale expansion of madrasas (educational institutions). Initially, small educational circles were established. Then, schools (*maktabs*) began to be integrated as an essential part of every mosque. As the demand grew and these mosque-based *maktabs* proved insufficient, numerous independent madrasas were established. By the Abbasid period, this development had progressed even further, leading to the establishment of major universities such as *Nizamiyah* and *Mustansiriyah*. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 6, pp. 332-33)

In summary, before Islam, various superstitions divided human society into higher and lower classes. This division resulted in knowledge being restricted to the upper class, while the lower classes remained in ignorance for thousands of years. The Islamic revolution, which emerged in the 7th century, was the first to dismantle these superstitions. It replaced the societal system based on superstitions with one founded on natural realities. Among the many positive outcomes of this revolution was the dissemination of knowledge from the elite to all segments of society.

The term *madrasa* has become as integral to the history of education as the word *education* is to the English language. Today, the internet is considered a global repository of knowledge. If you type the word *madrasa* on the keyboard of a computer connected to the internet, you will instantly see a wealth of information about madrasas appear on the screen.

Religious Madrasas

From the mid-19th century to the present, one of the most significant religious or Islamic movements in the Indian subcontinent has been the *Madrasa Movement*. The leaders of this movement were predominantly Islamic scholars (*ulama*). Through their persistent efforts, a network of madrasas was established throughout the region. Numerous small and large madrasas came into existence to such an extent that hardly any area was left without one.

The Islamic scholars did not only establish formal institutions in the form of madrasas; their personal lives also continuously served as a source of knowledge and education for people. It became a tradition among the *ulama* that their homes themselves functioned as centers of learning for the community.

I, too, have been closely associated with Islamic scholars for most of my life, in addition to receiving formal madrasa education. I have consistently benefited from their knowledge and religious guidance over the years.

The Importance of Knowledge

In Islam, knowledge holds immense importance. Allah's divine law was revealed to the prophets in the form of a book, which was written with a pen (*Quran*, 96:4-5). Both the pen and the book are symbols of knowledge. The association of revelation with the pen and the book is, in itself, evidence that the foundation of God's religion is built on knowledge.

The Quran identifies two types of knowledge, as indicated in the verse:

“Bring me a Book revealed before this or some other vestige of knowledge, if you are telling the truth”. (*Quran*, 46:4)

According to this verse, the first source of knowledge is divine scripture, which can also be referred to as revealed knowledge. However, this refers specifically to historically verified revealed knowledge. Any claim of divine revelation that lacks historical authenticity cannot be accepted. In this regard, the Quran is the only reliable representative of revealed knowledge today. Other sacred texts, due to their lack of historical reliability, cannot serve as authentic sources of divine knowledge.

The second type of knowledge is referred to in the Quran as “*Atharatin min ‘ilmin*” (a vestige of knowledge). The term “*Athar*” means “to narrate or transmit.” Eleventh-century Muslim scholar of Quranic exegesis and the Arabic language, Abul-Qasim al-Hussein Raghīb Isfahani, explained as:

“It refers to knowledge that is narrated or written, leaving behind a trace or impact.” (*Al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Quran*, p. 9)

I believe this refers to what is commonly known today as verified knowledge—knowledge that has been consistently validated through research, observation, and experimentation to the point of gaining general acceptance

among scholars. These two types of knowledge can be described as revealed knowledge and scientific knowledge.

The Quran emphasizes the importance of both types of knowledge. It states:

“Be mindful of God; He teaches you: He has full knowledge of everything.” (*Quran*, 2:228)

This verse connects knowledge with *taqwa* (piety), meaning that a person who develops piety within themselves will be blessed with knowledge. Piety instills seriousness in an individual, which is an essential condition for a successful intellectual journey.

Another verse in the Quran states:

“In the mountains there are streaks of various shades of white and red, and jet-black rocks; in like manner, men, beasts, and cattle have their diverse hues too. Only those of His servants, who possess knowledge, fear God.” (*Quran*, 35:27-28)

In this verse, mountains and animals (or, in other words, inanimate objects and living beings) are related to the phenomena of nature. This indicates that the study of natural phenomena can also lead to a sense of awe and piety, just as the study of revealed scripture does.

The importance of these two types of knowledge necessitated their inclusion in the curriculum of madrasas. Scholars classified these as *Manqulat* (revealed sciences) and *Ma'qulat* (rational sciences). This division is entirely valid from both a religious and intellectual perspective.

What is the Quranic concept of an educational institution like a madrasa? The answer can be found in this verse of the Quran:

“It is not right that all the believers should go out [in time of war] all together. Why, then, does not a party from every group come to [the Prophet] in order to acquire a deeper knowledge of religion and to warn their people, so that they can guard themselves against evil?” (*Quran*, 9:122)

In this verse of the Quran, the phrase *tafaqquh fi al-din* (deep understanding of religion) is used in nearly the same sense as the acquisition of religious knowledge. According to the Quran, the objectives of acquiring such knowledge are essentially twofold. The first is that the seeker of knowledge should become deeply familiar with the teachings of Islam, gaining access to the wisdom and truths conveyed in the Quran and the Sunnah. The second purpose is what the Quran refers to as *indhar al-qawm*—that is, to peacefully convey this understanding of religion to others, making every human being aware of the divine guidance that the Creator of the universe has revealed in the form of Islam. It is as a result of these dual responsibilities that, from the very outset, religious madrasas have upheld the ideal that their graduates should embody two qualities simultaneously. They should be religious scholars, and at the same time, well-wishers of humanity. On the one hand, they should attain a sound mastery of religious knowledge, and on the other, they should become sincere well-wishers of humankind.

The Beginning of the Madrasa Movement

In the 19th century, Muslims in the Indian subcontinent faced several grave challenges simultaneously. On the one hand, the long-standing political rule of Muslims came to an end, and on the other, the British government established complete control over the region. In these circumstances, Muslims were gripped by severe mental disarray. They were devoid of a clear sense of purpose or direction.

In this critical time, Islamic scholars (*ulama*), with the help of Allah, provided the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent with a *sense of direction*.

Following the fall of Muslim rule, these scholars became the architects of the Muslim renaissance in the new era. God had destined them to witness firsthand the consequences of the Muslim decline in the 19th century so they could plan for the revival of Muslims in the modern era based on reality and wisdom.

The Efforts of Indian Ulama in Establishing Madrasas

The efforts of Indian ulama to establish madrasas spanned from the 19th century to the 20th century. During this period, numerous madrasas were established. A few of the early madrasas are mentioned here as examples:

1. Darul Uloom, Deoband (1866)
2. Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama, Lucknow (1894)
3. Madrasa Al-Islah, Sarai Mir, Azamgarh (1909)

4. Madrasa Baqiyat-us-Salihah, Vellore, Tamil Nadu (1883)
5. Darul Uloom Khaliliya Nizamia, Tonk (1899)
6. Madrasa Aminia, Delhi (1897)
7. Mazahirul Uloom, Saharanpur (1866)
8. Jamia Darussalam, Umarabad (1924)
9. Jamia Mazharul Uloom, Banaras (1893)
10. Jamia Arabiya Hayatul Uloom, Mubarakpur (1899)

These institutions were not merely madrasas; they were guiding lights for the Muslim community, directing them toward a constructive field of action. From this perspective, the scholars of that era can be seen as trendsetters for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent.

The educational institutions established by the scholars of this early period in the form of madrasas became a source of educational awakening throughout the country. Subsequently, almost all the religious madrasas established in the Indian subcontinent were directly or indirectly the result of the influence of this initial madrasa movement.

Knowledge is undoubtedly the most valuable asset for any individual. It transforms an ordinary person into an extraordinary one. Knowledge is the only reliable means of all forms of human progress. In *Musnad Ahmad* (16717) and other Hadith collections, there is a narration in which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

“No parent has given a better gift to their child than good education and upbringing.” (*Tirmidhi*, Book of Righteousness, Hadith No. 1952)

If the terms “*parent*” and “*child*” in this Hadith are taken in an extended sense, it can be interpreted as follows: “*Child*” refers to the members of the community, and “*parent*” refers to the leaders of the community. This implies that if a community leader ensures better education and upbringing for their people, they too fall within the scope of this Hadith in a broader sense.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the scholars of that era gave the Muslim community its most valuable gift. By Allah’s grace, they were granted the opportunity to establish a system of religious education that continues to benefit generations of Muslims, ensuring an uninterrupted legacy of knowledge and guidance for the Muslim ummah.

A Positive Response to the Challenge

Over the past 150 years in the Indian subcontinent, several movements have emerged concerning Islam and the Muslim community. Among them, the most far-reaching and impactful was likely the *Madrassa Movement*, also referred to as the *Religious Madrasas Movement*.

If one were to identify the intellectual beginning of the Madrasa Movement, it would probably be in 1834. During that year, the renowned British statesman, Lord Macaulay (Thomas Babington Macaulay), arrived in India from London. At the time, British rule had been firmly established in the region. After assessing the situation, Lord Macaulay devised an educational scheme. Based on

this scheme, the educational system known as the English Education System was introduced in India.

The purpose of this system, as stated by Macaulay himself, was:

“So that a generation may arise, which is Indian in birth and English in thought”.

This was undoubtedly a significant challenge. The Madrasa Movement arose primarily as a response to this challenge.

If we were to describe the goal of the scholars’ educational scheme in light of Macaulay’s statement, it would likely be:

“So that a generation may arise, which is Indian in birth and, in thought and ideology, deeply Muslim.”

History tells us that Lord Macaulay’s plan did not succeed, while the plan of the Indian scholars (ulama), by the grace of Allah, was successful. As a result, today, Muslims in the Indian subcontinent exist with their full religious identity intact. The storm of Western civilization failed to erase the Muslim identity, and this success is largely due to the efforts of those madrasas established through the sacrifices of the scholars.

The Sacrifices of Madrasa Scholars

After declaring India as *Dar al-Ta’leem* (a land of education), the widespread establishment of religious madrasas across the country over the past 150 years did not happen on its own. It was the result of the silent sacrifices of thousands of scholars (*ulama*).

One and a half centuries ago, a single scholar could only propose an educational plan or establish a small initial madrasa. However, no single scholar, within the limits of their lifetime, could spread a network of madrasas across an entire region or educate an entire community generation after generation. For such a monumental task, it was necessary for successive scholars to rise and carry forward this mission, dedicating their lives to giving it practical form.

Over the past 150 years, thousands of scholars in the country have accomplished this great feat of selflessness and sacrifice. Among them are individuals we know today, while many others have passed away, returning to their Lord, and remain unknown to us. Yet the sacrifices of each of them are equally great. Whether someone is well-known or not is merely an incidental matter and not a reflection of their true contributions.

For these scholars, participating in this educational mission was not a simple task. It was akin to erasing oneself to give life to the Muslim community. It was a mission that required living a modest life and ultimately passing away in the process. It meant being content with low income for a lifetime or, in some cases, serving an institution for an entire life without any salary or compensation.

This effort demanded dedicating one's life to a cause with the prior knowledge that it would not bring any worldly recognition or honour. Moreover, it was a perilous endeavour that required entrusting one's family affairs to

God while devoting oneself to the task of building the future of the community.

Above all, this mission relied on public donations for its operation. Regarding donations, Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar (d. 1931) rightly remarked, "Asking for donations is akin to making oneself a servant in the eyes of others." Running a madrasa through donations was perhaps the greatest sacrifice these scholars had to make.

Yet, they endured all these hardships for the sake of God and continued this immensely challenging educational campaign. The truth is, if thousands of scholars had not stood up one after the other for this mission, and if they had not persisted despite every sacrifice, this initiative would have remained merely a theoretical idea and would have not become a reality.

These scholars sat on humble mats of contentment, teaching the children of the community about religion, while society looked down upon them with disdain rather than offering respect. This sentiment is captured in the words of a renowned Muslim poet in these two lines:

"If the work of children ends with the madrasa
and the mullah,

The cry of 'La ilaha illallah' will be choked forever."

This illustrates the heart-wrenching circumstances in which Islamic scholars carried out their educational mission.

It is worth noting that, in the Indian subcontinent, the educational mission was, for various reasons, run on the principle of *free education*. This principle made the work of the madrasa even more challenging.

Running such a vast and nationwide network of madrasas on the principle of free education was an incredibly difficult undertaking. Moreover, the scholars had decided that this system would operate independently, without any governmental support.

The Islamic scholars made this seemingly impossible task possible by taking the entire burden upon themselves. Through reliance on God (*tawakkul*), contentment (*qana'ah*), and frugality, they managed to turn the impossible into reality. These servants of God devoted themselves to the arduous task of education and teaching, entirely detached from worldly gains or losses.

In truth, successfully running such an extensive free education program in the modern era is a unique experiment, unparalleled on such a large scale in any other human society.

The circumstances of the madrasa community have now significantly changed. The current generation of scholars is reaping the rewards of past sacrifices, as their services are now widely recognized. Alongside this, modern conveniences have replaced the challenges of the past. However, history had to wait 150 years for this transformation to take place.

Guidance of Shariah

The guidance of Islamic Shariah is not limited to a few specific issues; rather, it provides direction in every aspect of life. One significant aspect of the madrasa movement is

that it was conducted in the light of the guiding principles of Shariah. This is why the madrasa movement achieved a level of success unmatched by any other movement in modern times.

Here, a few aspects of this guidance are highlighted.

The Hadith of Gentleness

This world operates according to the fixed laws of nature. One of these laws is that a greater part of power in this world lies in non-violence, while violence often leads to destruction. The greatest source of power in God's world is peace, not war. This law of nature is expressed in a hadith:

“Indeed, God grants through gentleness what He does not grant through harshness.” (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2593)

This Hadith does not pertain only to moral behaviour; rather, it applies to all forms of action, including major activities in collective life. The principle is that any meaningful action in this world requires deep planning. Numerous obstacles exist on the path of every endeavour, and at every step, there is the potential for conflict with others.

In such situations, what should one do?

If you decide to remove all obstacles from your path before proceeding so that your journey may continue quickly and without interruption, the result will be that your journey may never even begin. Such an approach leads to endless conflict. You will continuously fight one obstacle after another, and this violent struggle will never end.

This is because God has created human life in this world with various challenges and obstacles (*Quran*, 90:4). It is God's will that this world will never be free of difficulties. In such a situation, adopting a confrontational approach leads only to futile efforts, not to any meaningful or productive action.

The correct method of action in this world is to overlook obstacles and focus on utilizing opportunities through peaceful means. According to the *Quran*, difficulties (*'usr*) never exist alone in this world; they are always accompanied by ease (*yusr*):

“Surely with every hardship there is ease.”
(*Quran*, 94:5)

In this verse, *'usr* refers to problems, and *yusr* refers to opportunities. According to the laws of nature, these two are inseparable. As Ibn Kathir explains: “*With every difficulty, there exists an ease.*” (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Vol. 8, p. 417).

In such circumstances, the proper approach is to disregard problems and challenges and to focus instead on utilizing the available opportunities in a non-confrontational manner.

The madrasa movement is a practical example of this wise principle. In the 19th century, when scholars initiated this movement, one possible thought could have been to eliminate the existing hardships first—such as overthrowing the British rulers, destroying the structure of the English education system, and so on. Only then,

they might have believed, would they have the chance to establish their preferred educational system in the country. Had the scholars adopted this mindset, the movement would have started and ended within a few years, yielding no positive results for the Muslim community—just as many violent movements have failed to produce any meaningful benefits.

However, God granted the scholars the insight to understand the difference between these two approaches. They abandoned the futile task of destroying others and devoted all their energy to the constructive field of building their own system. The result was so successful that this movement became a practical example of the principle outlined in the Hadith mentioned earlier.

The Hadith on Consistency

Aisha bint Abu Bakr (may God be pleased with her) narrated that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was asked, “*Which deeds are most beloved to Allah?*” He replied, “*The most consistent of them, even if they are small.*” He further said, “*Commit yourselves only to what you are capable of.*” (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 6465)

This Hadith is often applied to acts of remembrance (*adhkar*) and worship. However, the truth is that the Prophet (peace be upon him) in this statement outlined a general principle of life. While it certainly applies to remembrance and worship, it is equally relevant to other aspects of life.

The preference for consistent actions, even if small, is not a mystery. This is because significant and lasting results can only be achieved when an action is sustained over a long period. Results and sustained effort are closely linked. Since only result-oriented actions are valued by God, temporary and unproductive disturbances are not favoured by Him.

This is why God values actions that embody consistency. The educational movement of the scholars was a positive and non-violent movement, and it developed the quality of consistency. Due to this characteristic, it became a movement beloved to God and, as a result, brought about numerous benefits.

The distinctive feature of the work carried out by scholars through the Madrasa Movement lies in its enduring and self-sustaining nature. Once initiated, it continued without interruption. As a result, the movement has remained active in the Indian subcontinent for nearly a century and a half, steadily expanding over time. During this period, the movement has not only flourished within the subcontinent but has also reached beyond its borders, as individuals trained under this system have established numerous madrasas—both large and small—around the world.

There has been an increase not only in their number, but also in terms of their nature and development. For example, alongside boys' madrasas, large madrasas for girls have also been established. Madrasas have been modernized, with the addition of computers and other new facilities. Various academic departments have also been added,

such as Dar al-Ifta (legal verdict departments), writing and publishing, religious guidance and understanding, journalism, and more.

One significant aspect of the scholars' work is that they established a healthy tradition that continued after them, with countless people advancing this tradition over the years. In this regard, it is appropriate to say that the madrasa movement initiated by these scholars exemplifies the saying of the Prophet Muhammad:

“Whenever a servant initiates a good tradition that is followed after him, he will receive a reward equal to those who follow it, without diminishing their rewards in the slightest.” (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 1017)

In this Hadith, “*good tradition*” refers to a healthy tradition. I believe the madrasa movement initiated by these scholars exemplifies precisely such a commendable tradition. Therefore, the rewards earned by those who have followed this tradition so far, or who will follow it in the future, will also be credited to its original pioneers. This will happen without reducing the rewards of those who act upon this tradition in any way.

The Peaceful Approach

In the 19th century, when the issue of Western colonialism became prominent, the initial reaction of Muslim leaders was militant in nature. They launched an armed jihad

against the British in 1857. However, this jihad failed to achieve its objective. Following this experience, they changed their approach.

Although armed jihad is, in principle, an Islamic act, when it comes to collective matters, it is not enough to determine whether an action is permissible in Islamic terms. It is equally important to assess whether it is practically effective and result-oriented. If an approach proves ineffective after experience, both reason and Shariah demand that the method be changed.

For example, the Prophet Muhammad was compelled to engage in armed confrontation with the chiefs of the Quraysh at the Battle of Badr (2 AH). However, later, he made a peace treaty with those same chiefs at Hudaibiyyah (6 AH). Similarly, during the Battle of Uhud (3 AH), the Prophet left Madinah and went three miles outside the city to confront the attackers. However, during the Battle of Ahzab (5 AH), he adopted a defensive strategy and stayed within Madinah to deal with the attackers.

This shows that changing one's strategy based on circumstances is both wise and in accordance with Islamic principles.

This shows that just as initiating action for a righteous purpose is a prophetic practice (*Sunnah*), so too is changing defensive strategies a prophetic practice. Both are equally Islamic and in line with the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. Indian scholars followed this established *Sunnah* by changing their approach after finding armed jihad to be ineffective. They shifted their focus to education, making it their new field of

action. In essence, the madrasa became a symbol of moving the collective Muslim struggle from the domain of violence to the domain of peace.

In this sense, it was a conscious decision to choose peaceful action over violent action. This decision reflected the understanding that instead of channeling their efforts into the field of violence, Muslim leaders could achieve far more by utilizing their energies in the field of peace.

Interestingly, in the latter half of the 19th century, two distinct educational movements emerged almost simultaneously. On the one hand was the movement led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, commonly known as the Aligarh Movement. Representing this movement, Maulana Altaf Hussain Hali (d. 1914) aptly remarked:

“The command of the present time is clear:

Education is everything in the world.”

On the other hand were Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi and his contemporary scholars. Maulana Nanautawi was a classmate of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan; both were students of Maulana Mamluk Ali at Delhi College. While both movements focused on education, their approaches differed. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan’s educational movement centered on the English language and secular sciences. In contrast, Maulana Nanautawi and his contemporaries aimed to promote the Arabic language and religious sciences among the Muslim community.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's educational movement was a response to the demands of the time, while the scholars' madrasa movement addressed the needs of religion. Among the movements that emerged within the Muslim community in modern times, these two stand out as the most positively impactful and result-oriented. The primary reason for their success was undoubtedly their unwavering commitment to the principles of peaceful struggle.

The madrasa movement initiated by Islamic scholars was a necessity of its time, full of potential. As a result, it continued to expand after its inception and has now reached a stage of widespread growth, with its presence evident everywhere.

The Leadership Role of Scholars

The Quran tells us that the primary addressees of the prophets were always the leaders of their communities (*mala'-e-qawm*) (7:88)—that is, the eminent and influential people of the time. To address such individuals effectively, the first and foremost condition is that the speaker and the listener must share a common language. If there exists a linguistic barrier between the two, meaningful communication becomes impossible. For this very reason, every prophet sent by God was from among his own people and spoke their language (11:4). That is, the language of the prophets was the same language spoken by the leading members of their communities.

Scholars (*ulama*) are considered the inheritors of the prophets. History shows that for nearly a thousand years

after the advent of Islam, scholars effectively fulfilled this role. One fundamental reason for their success was that, in those times, the language of the scholars was the same as that of the influential class.

In the centers of power such as Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordoba, scholars consistently played a leading role. The primary reason for this was that Arabic was the language of the elite, and it was also the language of Islamic scholars. As a result, there was no linguistic gap between the two groups, enabling effective communication and leadership.

Before British rule in India, a similar situation prevailed. During that time, the Muslim ruling elite generally spoke or understood Persian, and Persian was also the language of Islamic scholars. This enabled the scholars to address the influential class directly and successfully fulfill their leadership roles. For example, when Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi wished to address the rulers of his time, he faced no difficulty, as both groups shared Persian as their common language.

However, after the establishment of British rule in India, the situation changed. English became the language of the rulers, leaders, and educated individuals. Consequently, English became essential not only for interacting with the authorities but also for launching any major movement at the public level.

This linguistic shift brought a new chapter in the country's history. Islamic scholars, who had played a leading role in religious and political matters for nearly a thousand years, suddenly found themselves marginalized in this field.

For example, in the first half of the 20th century, two major movements emerged in the Indian subcontinent: the Indian independence movement and the movement for the partition of India. Scholars participated in both movements, but historical events reveal that their role was mostly secondary. The leadership in both movements was largely in the hands of non-scholars who had the ability to write and speak in English.

After the partition, this situation largely persisted. For instance, one of the most significant movements among Indian Muslims after partition was the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat. A large number of scholars were involved in this movement. However, gradually, the same pattern emerged: the scholars became ineffective within the organization, while non-scholars, such as Dr. Abdul Jaleel Faridi and Dr. Syed Mahmood, gained dominance. This led to tensions between the scholars and non-scholars, ultimately resulting in internal conflicts and divisions within the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat, which collapsed before achieving its objectives.

It would not be incorrect to say that Indian scholars possess, in potential, all the qualities necessary to play a leadership role in the current circumstances. However, one key deficiency has sidelined them from the field of leadership: their inability to write and speak in English—or, more broadly, in contemporary languages.

It has now become imperative for scholars to learn English with special emphasis. Otherwise, they may achieve a degree of reverence in today's world, but it will not be

possible for them to assume leadership roles. This is a natural outcome, dictated by the laws of nature, rather than the result of any conspiracy.

It is not necessary for madrasas to include English as a compulsory subject in their curriculum. The only requirement is that every major madrasa should offer English and contemporary sciences as *optional subjects*, giving students the opportunity to study them if they wish. This is the only way to enable madrasas and scholars to regain their ability to play a leadership role in today's circumstances.

During my participation in international conferences, I have repeatedly observed that other religions have many individuals who can represent their faiths on global platforms using the English language and modern styles of communication. However, it is rare to find scholars within Islamic circles who are truly qualified for this task and can effectively represent Islam according to contemporary standards.

It is the essential responsibility of religious madrasas to take the necessary measures to address this shortcoming.

Some additional steps in this regard could include: Organizing *extension lectures* on modern, relevant topics.

- Recommending supplementary books alongside the prescribed syllabus.
- Providing opportunities for students to participate in interfaith gatherings.
- Establishing *training camps* for students during holidays.

- Conducting programs for speeches and discussions on modern topics under the students' associations.

Such initiatives would help equip madrasa students with the tools needed to engage with the modern world effectively.

The Role of Madrasa in Religious Understanding

The concept of an Islamic educational institution, as described in the Quran, is that it should produce individuals who, after graduating, engage in the task of religious understanding and explaining Islam to the nations of the world (*Quran*, 9:122). Since the advent of Islam, this task has continued uninterrupted. In every era, the religious madrasa that was established had this very purpose—that under its system, such scholars would be prepared who could not only provide religious guidance to Muslims but also represent Islamic teachings among the nations of the world. This system of madrasa continues, more or less, even today.

However, due to later circumstances, this aspect of the madrasa shifted from a style of dialogue to a style of debate. As a result, the madrasa has become practically ineffective in presenting a true introduction to Islam within the secular world. Every year, thousands of scholars graduate from the madrasa, but they are not adequately equipped to fulfill the need of representing Islam before the modern mind.

The reason for this lies in the difference in contemporary conditions. On the surface, students in the madrasa are still being trained—through curricular and extracurricular means—for the task of introducing and representing religion. But this training is entirely based on the principles of debate, rather than on the true principles of dialogue.

Madrasa students study the science of debate, but they are unfamiliar with modern methods of communication. They may be good debaters, but they are not effective dialoguers. This is precisely what has made madrasa graduates practically unsuitable for introducing religion to the modern individual.

In ancient times, debate (*munazara*) was the prevailing method of discourse. This method emerged under the influence of the “*Era of the Sword*.” The principle of the sword was based on victory and defeat: whoever triumphed on the battlefield was deemed successful, and whoever lost was considered a failure. Under this specific environment, the art of debate developed, which was also based on the principle of winning and losing. The only difference was that, while the sword determined the outcome on the battlefield, words were used to decide victory and defeat in the arena of debate.

This type of debate was highly popular in the context of the ancient era. It became widespread and celebrated. However, in the modern age, this trend has completely changed. The present time is the era of scientific analysis, not of verbal disputes. As a result, where debates were once held, serious dialogues are now conducted.

This shift in time demands that the educational system of madrasas be aligned with these changes. Students should be prepared for scientific discussion rather than debate and argumentation.

What is the difference between debate (*munazara*) and dialogue? The fundamental difference is that a debater, from the very beginning, considers the other person an opponent.

A debater does not have a feeling of goodwill toward the other side. Instead of seeking mutual understanding, he is more interested in the other person's defeat.

Because of this mindset, the entire process of debate turns into a kind of verbal wrestling. The debater's language becomes sharp like a saw, not soft like a flower. It even reaches the point where the debater no longer cares about what is right and what is wrong. All his interest lies in somehow defeating the other party in the field of argument, like a skilled lawyer. By reading the accounts of the debates that took place before 1947, this can be clearly understood.

In Quranic terms, the difference between *munazara* (debate) and dialogue can be summed up in one key idea: the target of dialogue is the human heart. A person engaged in dialogue seeks to speak in a way that touches and reaches the heart of the other (Quran, 4:23). In contrast, a debater focuses on defeating the other party through argument and rhetoric. However, this approach to debate does not reflect the method of the Prophet (Sunnah), which emphasized wisdom, compassion, and heartfelt communication.

It is essential to reform the educational system of madrasas in this regard.

The Ever-Flowing Stream of Knowledge

From the very beginning of Islam, education—teaching and learning—became an integral part of Muslim society and has remained so ever since. This ever-flowing stream of knowledge had two main currents: institutional learning

and individual discipleship. These two currents have been a permanent feature of Islamic history since its earliest period.

The first educational institution established during this period was known as Suffah. The first teacher of this Suffah Madrasa was none other than the Prophet Muhammad himself, and its students were known as the Ashab al-Suffah (Companions of Suffah). Abu Hurairah, one of the most prominent narrators of Hadith, was a student of this Madrasa. This institution can be seen as the seed of Islamic education. Over time, it grew into a mighty tree, with its branches and leaves spreading across nearly the entire inhabited world.

The second, and arguably larger, current of this educational stream was in the form of individual discipleship. Every knowledgeable individual was a member of this great caravan of education. The earliest example of this can be found among the Companions of the Prophet. Almost all the leading Companions dedicated themselves to becoming centers of learning for people on a daily basis. This education was conducted on the principle of individual discipleship.

After this, the tradition of individual teaching continued generation after generation. The Tabi'in (followers of the Companions) gained knowledge from the Companions, and the Tabi' Tabi'in (followers of the followers) were taught by the Tabi'in. This pattern was followed by all groups of Islamic scholars. The majority of Hadith scholars, jurists, exegetes, commentators, theologians, historians of Islam, imams, and Islamic scholars, as well as many righteous

individuals and mystics, acquired their religious knowledge through individual discipleship and personal mentorship.

Most of the great scholars in Islamic history were trained through these individual learning systems. Even later scholars such as Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, Maulana Shibli Nomani, and Maulana Hamiduddin Farahi were also products of this individual educational system.

Western culture, being a merchant culture, commercialized everything, including education. As a result, the focus shifted entirely to job-oriented education, linking education with employment. This led to the rise of schools and colleges that granted certificates, making them increasingly prevalent. Today, secular education has almost completely abandoned the system of individual discipleship, as the desired degrees are awarded by accredited institutions rather than through personal scholarly mentorship. This transformation naturally impacted the system of religious education as well.

The educational system, which I have referred to as the two streams of the *ever-flowing fountain of knowledge*, is not just a historical account for me—it is also part of my personal experience. By the grace of Allah, I had the opportunity to benefit from both streams of this system and to be fully enriched by them.

Here, I will share some of my experiences in this regard, which contain lessons of general value. I was likely admitted to my village madrasa around 1930, where I began my education with the basics of the alphabet. My teacher at the

village madrasa was the late Maulana Faizur Rahman Islahi, the son of the late Maulana Muhammad Shafi, the founder of Madrasa Al-Islah.

Maulana Faizur Rahman Islahi, a scholar of great ability, was not only my madrasa teacher but also my personal mentor. As a result, I was perhaps the first student at this madrasa to receive instruction in elementary Persian and Arabic, while most other students limited themselves to Urdu and basic Quranic reading.

It was my good fortune to have a dedicated scholar like Maulana Faizur Rahman Islahi during my formative years. He instilled in me a passion for acquiring knowledge at a young age—a passion that has never left me since.

In addition to the formal education I received at the madrasa, my home also served as a permanent informal learning center for me. After the passing of my father, Fareeduddin Khan (1929), my elder cousin, Maulana Iqbal Ahmad Khan Suhail, Advocate, MA, LLB, became my mentor and guardian. He was highly intelligent and well-educated, possessing a deep understanding of knowledge. He had studied Persian and Arabic texts, lesson by lesson, with the eminent teachers of the time, such as Maulana Muhammad Shafi (founder of Madrasa Al-Islah), Maulana Shibli Nomani, and Maulana Hamiduddin Farahi.

Later, he enrolled at Aligarh University, where he earned his MA and LLB degrees and began practicing law in Azamgarh. Over time, he became known as “*Mr. Suhail*” and “*Sahib*.” However, as far as my educational relationship

with him was concerned, it continued until the end of his life. My educational engagement with the late Maulana Iqbal Ahmad Suhail reminds me of the earlier times when every learned individual was, in themselves, a center of education. Many of the great scholars of the past attained their high level of knowledge through such personal learning environments.

My elder uncle, Sufi Abdul Majeed Khan, was deeply committed to ensuring that someone in the family pursued a formal madrasa education and became a religious scholar. In 1938, he sponsored my admission to Madrasa Al-Islah (Sarai Mir, Azamgarh) as a capable student and personally oversaw the completion of my education. My formal madrasa-style education took place at this institution. During my time at Madrasa Al-Islah, I had the opportunity to benefit from several distinguished teachers, some of whom are mentioned on other pages of this book.

After completing my education at Madrasa Al-Islah, I spent a long period immersed in libraries, such as the library of Darul Musannifeen in Azamgarh and many others. During this time, I delved deeper into the study of the Quran, Hadith, Seerah, and other Islamic sciences in greater detail. While living in Azamgarh, I also continued to learn from various scholars on an individual basis, such as Shah Muinuddin Ahmad Nadvi, Maulana Iqbal Ahmad Suhail, and others (see “Maulana Suhail” in *Mazaameen-e-Rasheed* by Professor Rasheed Ahmad Siddiqui).

In 1956, I joined the central writing department of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind. At that time, the central office and the

writing department were located in Rampur (U.P.). During my time there, Maulana Jaleel Ahsan Nadvi (d. 1981) became my Arabic teacher. Maulana Nadvi had exceptional expertise in Arabic literature, and I continuously benefited from his knowledge.

During this period in Rampur, I also had the opportunity to learn repeatedly from a renowned scholar, Maulana Abdul Wahab. Additionally, I benefited greatly from Maulana Sadruddin Islahi (d. 1998) during my stay in Rampur, gaining continuous academic and scholarly insights from him.

In 1963, I joined the Majlis Tahqiqat wa Nashriyat-e-Islam (Lucknow) and took up residence at Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama. For several years, I stayed on the campus of Nadwatul Ulama, where I consistently benefited from the senior teachers there. Among them were Maulana Muhammad Ishaq Sandilwi, Maulana Muhammad Owais Nagrami, Maulana Abdul Hafeez Balyawi, and Maulana Muhammad Taqi Amini. Undoubtedly, this list also includes the name of Maulana Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi.

Additionally, during my stay in Lucknow, I had the continuous opportunity to benefit from Maulana Abdul Bari Nadwi (d. 1976), who lived close to Nadwa in Lucknow. Towards the end of 1966, I formally pledged allegiance (bai'ah) to him. He was an appointed khalifa (successor) of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi.

In 1967, I moved to Delhi and have since settled there permanently. Here, I have maintained a continuous

association with Delhi's madrasas and scholars, such as Maulana Mufti Atiqur Rahman Usmani, Maulana Muhammad Mian (former scholar of Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind), Maulana Qazi Sajjad Husain (Principal of Madrasa Alia Fatehpuri), Maulana Abdul Haleem Siddiqui, Maulana Abdul Khaliq Naqvi, and others.

The key elements are translated in a structured manner below:

Academic and Educational Journey

Locations	Scholars and Teachers	Year of Death
At Ancestral Village:	Maulana Faizur Rahman Islahi	1972
At Sarai Mir	Maulana Amin Ahsan Islahi	1998
	Maulana Akhtar Ahsan Islahi	1985
	Maulana Shibli Nadawi	1973
	Maulana Dawud Akbar Islahi	1983
	Maulana Sayeed Ahmed Nadawi	1949
In Azamgarh	Maulana Iqbal Ahmad Khan Suhail	1955
	Maulana Moinuddin Ahmad Shah Nadawi	1974
In Rampur	Maulana Jalil Ahsan Nadawi	1999
	Maulana Muhammad Ishaq Sandelwi	1995
	Maulana Muhammad Owaise Nagrami	1971
	Maulana Abdul Bari Nadawi	1976
In Aligarh	Maulana Sayeed Ahmad Akbarabadi	1985
	Maulana Muhammad Taqi Amini	1991
In Delhi	Maulana Qazi Sajjad Hussain	1990
	Maulana Muhammad Miyan	1975
	Maulana Abdul Khaliq Naqvi	1975
	Maulana Abdul Haleem Siddiqui	1969
	Maulana Mufti Atiqur Rahman	1984

After my arrival in Delhi in 1967, I frequently traveled to Aligarh. There, I continued to benefit from scholars such as Maulana Muhammad Taqi Amini (Director of Theology, Aligarh Muslim University) and Maulana Saeed Ahmad Akbarabadi. During this period, I once stayed for several months at the Jama Masjid of Aligarh Muslim University.

The examples mentioned above are directly the result of the Madrasa Movement. It is, in fact, the success of the Madrasa Movement that educational institutions were established in every town and city, enabling me and many others to formally acquire religious education.

As a result, scholars emerged in almost every place who could serve as a source of knowledge for anyone seeking to quench their intellectual thirst. From my ancestral village to my time in Delhi, spanning nearly 80 years of life, I found educational institutions and knowledgeable individuals at every stage who helped me advance my understanding of religious knowledge. Undoubtedly, all of this was made possible due to the Madrasa Movement.

Benefits and Blessings

The benefits and blessings of religious madrasas are numerous and encompass various aspects of life. Just as the advantages of knowledge are limitless, so too are the benefits of madrasas or educational institutions. Here, a few examples are mentioned symbolically to highlight their value.

The Continuity of Religious Knowledge

Through religious madrasas, Muslims have gained numerous benefits, one of which is the continuity or preservation of religious knowledge. It is directly or indirectly due to these madrasas that the transmission of religious knowledge has continued generation after generation in the Indian subcontinent, which is essential for the perpetual survival of any community. To understand this, I will present an anecdotal example.

In 1994, I traveled to Spain (Andalusia). It has been commonly believed that when Muslims' 800-year political rule in Spain ended, the Muslim population there also ceased to exist. Either the Muslims were killed, or they fled the country. However, after my visit to Spain, I realized that this perception is not accurate.

In reality, after the fall of political power in 1492, thousands of Muslims remained in Spain. The tragedy was not the complete disappearance of Muslims from Spain; rather, it was the breakdown of the continuity of religious education in the generations that followed.

As is well known, during Muslim rule in Spain, knowledge flourished extensively, but all of this was under government sponsorship. Education, teaching, and the propagation of Islam were entirely state-supported. This effort expanded to such an extent that it is said that during that time, nearly 100% of Spain's Muslims were literate. However, with the fall of the Muslim government and the end of its educational patronage, the entire educational system also collapsed.

As a result, the continuity of religious knowledge was severed in subsequent Muslim generations in Spain. This disconnection persisted for generations until the people lost their religious identity. They became so assimilated into the local society that they even forgot that their ancestors had once been Muslims.

In the 19th century, when Muslim rule ended in India, a similar threat arose for the Muslim generations here. In India as well, education and teaching were primarily conducted under government sponsorship. With the fall of Muslim rule, this external patronage nearly disappeared. However, at this critical juncture, God raised Islamic scholars who devised a plan to run the system of religious education with the support of the general Muslim population, independent of government aid. By the special grace of God, this plan succeeded, and over time, a vast network of small and large madrasas spread across the country.

The success of this educational initiative ensured that India was spared from experiencing a situation like Spain's. It is well known that Muslims in this country are living with their full religious identity intact. Their religious life has become so robust that despite the recurring storms of various kinds, none have posed a threat to their faith. As an English saying goes, the Muslims of this country have proven to be "the big bird of the storm" on every occasion.

Much of the credit for this goes to the educational system established by the scholars—the system of madrasas, which continues to educate Muslim generations and preserve their religious identity.

Access to Books

A Hadith states: “*Preserve knowledge by writing it down.*” (Sunan Al-Darimi, Hadith No. 514). According to this, there are two types of knowledge: one that is preserved in written form and another that remains unwritten. The difference between a knowledgeable person (*‘alim*) and an ignorant person (*Jahil*) lies in their access to these types of knowledge. An ignorant person can only access unwritten knowledge, while a knowledgeable person has access to both written and unwritten knowledge.

A person who cannot read is limited to what they can hear. Knowledge that exists beyond their hearing—preserved in books and written records—remains inaccessible to them. However, more than 99% of all knowledge is preserved in written form. Educational institutions enable people to access this preserved knowledge.

In my personal case, I am naturally an introverted person. Once, an Arab sheikh asked me about myself, and I replied: “*I am a man who loves solitude.*” (*Ana rajulun yuhibbu al-‘uzlah*).

The education I received at the madrasa made it possible for me to fully utilize my solitude for acquiring knowledge. If I had been deprived of the ability to study books, this would never have been possible. In that case, I would have only known the few things I happened to hear from people around me. However, being able to read meant that I could use all my time to increase my knowledge and understanding.

The greatest benefit of the ability to read is that it allows a person to connect with the minds of people worldwide, including even the knowledge and research of those who have passed away.

Someone once said, *“A person with a book is never alone.”* This statement is absolutely true. An educated individual, through books, can spend their days and nights in the company of brilliant minds. Clearly, there is no greater fortune than this.

Religious madrasas have given countless people this gift. These institutions have enabled individuals to learn from written works what they may never hear in person and to become companions of great thinkers and scholars through their books, even if they never had the chance to meet them.

From an early age, I have had the habit of reflecting on small things that most people overlook. This habit has allowed me to derive great lessons from seemingly insignificant matters. This specific quality is referred to in the Quran as “*tawassum*” (Quran, 15:75).

For example, during my time in the madrasa, I studied some books with Maulana Saeed Ahmad Nadwi, including books on Hadith. While studying Hadith, I experienced a remarkable realization. I thought to myself that the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), spoken 1,400 years ago and which I could not have heard personally, were now accessible to me through a book.

Similarly, I studied several books with Maulana Daud Akbar Islahi. While reading *Duroos al-Tarikh al-Islami*, I felt particularly aware that I was learning about events I had not personally witnessed but could now understand through the medium of books.

Among the Arabic books I studied in the madrasa was *Al-Mufasssal fi al-Nahw*, which was taught to us by Maulana Akhtar Ahsan Islahi. The author of this book, *Jarullah al-Zamakhshari* (d. 538 AH), was a Mu'tazilite scholar who did not hide his beliefs and openly criticized non-Mu'tazilite scholars. The works of many Mu'tazilite scholars from that era were destroyed, but Zamakhshari's *Al-Mufasssal fi al-Nahw* and *Al-Kashshaf 'an Haqaiq al-Tanzil* were preserved as exceptions because no equivalent works in grammar and exegesis existed.

Through this incident, even during my education, I came to understand a profound truth of life: if a person excels in knowledge and skill to an extraordinary degree, even their fiercest opponents cannot ignore or dismiss them.

Educational curricula generally include classical books, and the same is true for madrasas. Most of the books I studied in my madrasa were classical works written by scholars of earlier generations. While reading these books, I would often feel a deep appreciation for the incredible blessing of the written word. Writing allows a person to access the works of learned individuals from every era, even without having lived in those times.

Madrasa education enables a person to gain access to books. Once someone becomes capable of learning from books, they simultaneously gain the ability to benefit from the research and intellectual contributions of thinkers and scholars from all over the world. Without the ability to study books, a person's intellectual capacity remains limited. But with the ability to study, their personality expands into a universal one. The vast treasure trove of global literature becomes a wide academic feast available to them.

In this book, I have mentioned some incidents from my madrasa life. I have done so to make my observations about madrasas more tangible and relatable for readers. This is essentially an expression of a general truth conveyed through personal experiences. By generalizing these individual incidents, one can understand the kind of spiritual and human training that people receive in the environment of madrasas.

Supply House

Another significant benefit of religious madrasas can be described in a single phrase: a "supply house." To explain what this means, let me provide an example. In India, there is an extensive educational structure in the form of schools, colleges, and universities. This system is supported by substantial government funding.

The reason for this is that these secular educational institutions serve as a major supply house for the country. The nation continuously requires skilled individuals to operate

its economic and national machinery, and these institutions fulfill that need. They supply reliable professionals for various sectors—teachers, clerks, officers, managers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, supervisors, editors, pilots, secretaries, administrators, and so on. All these individuals are produced by the secular educational institutions we call schools, colleges, and universities.

The same applies to the vast Muslim community. The nearly 200 million Muslims living in this country constantly need individuals to fulfill their various religious and communal requirements. To meet these needs, religious madrasas function as a continuous “supply house.”

Currently, there are approximately 500,000 mosques in India, and the imams for these mosques come from these religious madrasas. Countless educational institutions also receive their teachers from here. Similarly, administrators for community institutions, authors for writing and publishing departments, and editors for Islamic journalism are supplied by these madrasas. Today, many organizations exist within the Muslim community, and most of their personnel are also sourced from this supply house.

An important lesson to learn here is that negative actions often prove to be futile, while positive actions not only achieve their primary goals but also bring about numerous additional benefits that their initial leaders might never have imagined. For instance, in modern times, a new tool called the computer has emerged. It created a demand for Urdu operators and Arabic operators everywhere.

Even for this new field of computers, the majority of skilled personnel came from the supply house of religious madrasas. Similarly, modern secular universities established departments under the name of “Islamic Studies” or “Muslim History,” where Muslims could academically represent Islam at the university level. The individuals for these departments were also sourced primarily from religious madrasas.

Likewise, there arose a need for Urdu and Arabic-speaking individuals in embassies, radio, foreign affairs, cultural institutions, and export trade. This demand, too, was largely met by the supply house of religious madrasas.

In modern times, following the industrial explosion, general opportunities opened up for people to travel to various countries in large numbers. Among those who migrated, a considerable number were individuals educated in religious madrasas. Their settlement in foreign countries became an additional source of benefit.

One significant advantage of these madrasa-educated individuals residing abroad was that when Urdu-speaking scholars later traveled to these countries for religious purposes, these individuals were already there to act as their helpers and coordinators.

The supply house established in the form of religious madrasas was not confined to any specific limit. This supply house met the religious needs within the country and also those outside it. These individuals established madrasas in India as well as in Europe, America, and Africa. Through

them, capable individuals have been and continue to be provided for every field of knowledge.

In this world, there is always room for continuous improvement in every endeavour. Undoubtedly, there are many possibilities to make this supply house even more beneficial. By collective reflection and planning, these possibilities can be realized, and the system of education and training can be made even more effective.

The End of An Intellectual Gap

One more benefit achieved through religious seminaries was that it prevented the development of what is called an intellectual gap between the elite of the community and the general masses of the nation.

The Quran speaks of a division among the Jews, mentioning a group possessing knowledge and intellect (*Quran*, 2:75). Here, the term “group” refers to the scholars among the Jews, also known as the “Rabbis”. Following this, it addresses a second category within the Jewish community, the common people, as mentioned in the Quran: “Among them are illiterate ones who do not know the Book, but only wishful thinking” (*Quran*, 2:78). The word used here, “ummi” (pl. “ummiyoona”), refers to individuals who are unlettered or uneducated, unable to read or write (*Al-Jami-al-Ahkam Al-Quran* by Al-Qurtubi, p. 5).

Historically, there was no culture of general education within the Jewish community; only select families gained religious knowledge. The scholars, being literate, were

responsible for studying and teaching religious texts, while the common masses largely remained uneducated, with limited understanding of their own religious traditions. Consequently, a significant intellectual divide emerged, wherein some families held scholarly status while the majority of people remained part of the general public, lacking access to religious literature or the ability to comprehend it independently.

As a result, an intellectual gap developed between the scholars and the general populace, with the masses being unable to engage with or interpret religious texts. Over time, this separation led the common people further away from the scholars. For many, religion became a matter of superstitions and wishful thinking, rather than a path grounded in true knowledge.

This intellectual gap hindered any meaningful reform within the Jewish community. Reform, after all, depends on guidance rooted in divine scriptures, yet the masses lacked the comprehension needed to grasp scholarly language and interpretations.

In ancient times, many nations witnessed a clear divide between their elite and the masses. A notable example of this is found in India, where for thousands of years, society was rigidly divided between the elite (Brahmins) and the common people. Education and literacy were confined almost exclusively to the Brahmin caste, with no educational institutions available for the general populace.

As a result, the majority of the population, approximately 95%, remained uneducated and trapped in ignorance, often perceiving superstitions as religion.

The revolutionary step of breaking this monopoly on knowledge and extending education to the masses was taken for the first time in history by Islam. Muslim scholars significantly contributed to expanding education globally, including in India. During the Muslim period, the establishment of public educational institutions, such as schools, allowed Hindu students to study alongside Muslim students. This integration marked a departure from the exclusivity of education and benefited non-Muslims as well.

When Muslim scholars later began establishing more widespread madrasas in the 19th century, these institutions also became accessible to non-Muslims. A notable feature of these madrasas was that they were located within local communities, making it easier for parents to send their children to study without requiring them to travel far. This inclusivity naturally attracted non-Muslim students as well.

An example of this impact can be seen in the life of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of independent India, who received his early education at a Muslim madrasa in Bihar during his childhood. This demonstrates how madrasas, by their inclusive approach, contributed to the educational upliftment of broader society, including non-Muslim communities.

Islam was the first religion in the world to address the intellectual gap between the elite and the common people,

striving to bridge this divide and eliminate its negative consequences. Indian scholars perpetuated this Islamic tradition by establishing a system of madrasas across the country. This initiative had a significant advantage: it prevented the emergence of an intellectual gap between scholars and the general public. By creating numerous madrasas in villages and cities, they ensured that millions of people could access education.

Furthermore, Islamic books became accessible to the masses, enabling individuals to understand the scholars' insights and build their awareness accordingly. If the madrasa system had failed to address this intellectual gap, a severe divide might have emerged among Muslims, akin to the rift seen in Jewish history between the Pharisees and the common people, or in Hindu society between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins.

One of the extraordinary contributions of Indian scholars was making religious education free of cost. This decision catered to the financial struggles of most people, who could not afford education on their own. Had the madrasa system been based on tuition fees, a majority of Muslims would have remained deprived of knowledge despite the availability of madrasas. By relying on God's support, scholars institutionalized free education and sustained it despite numerous challenges.

During British rule, schools and colleges were predominantly urban-centric, leaving about 75% of the population without

access to education. In contrast, scholars ensured that religious education reached every household.

For example, I was born in a remote village in Uttar Pradesh, but fortunately, there was a madrasa in the mosque of the village. This madrasa was established by the family of Abdul Ali Khan Sahib on their own initiative. Now, with the support of Janab Yameen-ul-Islam Khan (Engineer) and others, it is undergoing significant development.

According to the general rule, no tuition fee was charged in this madrasa. At a young age, I was enrolled in this madrasa. If there had been no madrasa in the village, my guardians might not have had the courage to send a young child to a distant place.

In this madrasa, I received basic education in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic. Afterward, I went to another place for further education, where I enrolled in a larger madrasa to complete my studies in the Arabic language and Islamic sciences.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, various movements operating under the name of Islam and the Muslim community gained significant popularity in the Indian subcontinent. A large number of Muslims were drawn to these movements. Regardless of how impactful these movements were, their acceptance can largely be attributed to how religious institutions managed to eliminate the intellectual divide between the elite and the common people.

It is a fact that in the present era, any movement that has successfully prepared the minds of the masses has done so as a result of the educational efforts of such institutions. If

the widespread dissemination of education had not bridged the intellectual gap between the elite and the commoners, these movements might not have achieved their acceptance.

In such situations, movements launched newspapers and journals to spread awareness, but they failed to garner any readership. They organized meetings, but those gatherings attracted people who, despite their enthusiasm, failed to comprehend the ideas presented. The elites would use words and phrases, both in writing and speech, whose meaning they themselves understood but which were completely alien to the general populace. They continued to use these words and phrases to inform the masses, but this method remained ineffective.

In such circumstances, the ultimate outcome of these movements was predictable.

Madrasas: Religious Infrastructure in Action

One of the many benefits that the Muslim community derives from religious institutions is the establishment of a “religious infrastructure.” Any activity, to function effectively, requires suitable practical planning or infrastructure. For example, commercial activities in a country succeed only when there is a comprehensive network of facilities enabling the transportation of goods across the nation, as well as an efficient telecommunication system that can easily transmit messages across distant areas. This necessity is equally applicable to religious and national endeavours, where a widespread infrastructure

is essential. Just as physical infrastructure is crucial for material development, religious infrastructure is necessary for the growth and sustainability of religious efforts.

Religious schools, or madrasas, initially began as small initiatives but gradually expanded. The nature of the work at these institutions evolved such that young people trained in these schools gained the skills to establish their own madrasas. Thus, the madrasa movement began, advancing naturally on its own accord. Graduates from one madrasa went on to establish new institutions. This growth wasn't just arithmetical, like 1, 2, 3, and so on; it became geometric, expanding rapidly at a rate of 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, and so forth. This type of expansion became a sustainable movement, self-driven by its inherent characteristics.

As a result of this, the religious school movement not only survived but began to flourish with increasing internal strength. It spread rapidly, creating small-scale centers of learning almost everywhere. Mosques served as precursors to madrassas (Islamic schools), establishing the foundation for such institutions. Thus, nearly every mosque either housed a madrassa or eventually became the base for one. When the mosque's capacity proved insufficient, permanent madrassas were established in the form of dedicated buildings. This created a network of madrassas on a smaller scale across the country, whose number has been estimated to be in the thousands, or even hundreds of thousands.

These madrassas were initially set up to provide purely religious education. However, as per the law of nature, they eventually developed an infrastructure that became the foundational pillar for every religious and national movement in the region. In the 20th century, any religious or national movement that emerged on this land found these madrassas ready to produce prepared minds and supporters. The madrassas facilitated the leaders of such movements by creating a favourable environment for their objectives. They became local supporters for movements and helped create conditions conducive to their success. From their establishment to the organization of meetings, the madrassas played a critical role in providing the required resources.

If this network of madrassas had not been in place, it would not have been possible for any national movement in contemporary times to achieve the scale and scope necessary to make a significant impact. Their existence not only facilitated the core mission of these movements but also generated additional, unintended benefits, much like a tree that, after its initial growth, provides shade, fruit, and wood.

Similarly, any righteous movement launched within a society inevitably produces supplementary benefits. This principle applies to religious schools. Although their primary goal is to promote religious knowledge, their establishment often results in multiple other benefits. A significant advantage is that these schools become foundational institutions for

future national movements, contributing to the social and religious fabric of the region.

True Citizens

A distinct quality of religious madrasas is that they aim to create true citizens for the country. True citizens are those who live according to moral principles and human values. Society needs such people, as no society can truly flourish without them. However, in today's India, there are no institutions dedicated to creating these true citizens. The educational systems at schools, colleges, and universities are largely secular and only prepare individuals to meet their economic and material needs. Moral education is not included among their objectives.

In this context, the system of religious madrasas stands out as a unique structure focused on fulfilling the goal of moral development. The primary aim of these madrasas is to impart Islamic teachings to their students, from elementary stages to advanced levels at the dar al-uloom (higher Islamic educational institutions). This objective is based on the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who said, *"I have been sent to complete the nobility of character"* (Muwatta Imam Malik, Hadith No. 3357). He also said, *"The most perfect of the believers in faith are those who have the best character"* (Musnad Ahmad, Hadith No. 7402). Thus, the perfection of faith is closely tied to moral excellence.

In religious madrasas, young students receive comprehensive moral and spiritual training. Throughout their education,

they are taught principles of ethics and humanity. The entire atmosphere of the madrasa fosters such values, which the lives of the Prophet and his Companions presented as role models. Consequently, madrasas serve as institutions that practically provide the nation with true citizens and better human beings.

Here I will give a few examples to explain this. Once I went to madrasa in established in the Himachal Pradesh by an Aalim (Islamic scholar) from Deoband. Many Hindu communities resided around this madrasa, and initially, some Hindus were apprehensive about the presence of the madrasa, fearing it might bring trouble to them. However, after experiencing the madrasa's positive and peaceful environment over time, their fears dissipated.

As an example, a fire broke out in a Hindu neighbourhood close to the madrassa one night. As soon as the students learned of it, they rushed without any hesitation to help extinguish the fire, providing assistance without any prejudice. The local Hindus were deeply moved by this selfless act and developed a new level of respect for the madrasa and its students. After these events and experiences, the misunderstandings of the Hindus were dispelled. They began to consider the madrassa as a blessing for themselves, to the extent that even now, if Hindus had any personal disputes to resolve, they would go to the madrassa people because they had full trust in them.

Similarly, once I went to another madrassa and found a garden there. At that time, a Hindu gardener was taking

care of this garden. When I met him, he told me that when I first arrived, I was afraid that the madrassa people might damage the garden's yield, but that thought proved wrong. The madrassa people were such that if a branch broke and fell on the ground, they would not even pick it up. They would leave it untouched. This example can be found in many places, where religious madrassas are playing a role in maintaining peace, which can serve as an exemplary model for the world.

The Distinctive Features of Religious Schools

The most important distinctive feature of religious schools is that their foundation is based on "true knowledge," i.e., the teachings of Islam, which is the only preserved religious tradition. This is a significant point because, unlike other educational systems where the basis of learning is secular knowledge rather than divine truth, religious schools provide a unique platform.

As a result, those who receive education and training in religious seminaries are equipped to base their beliefs and actions on a foundation of trust. They live with the conviction that what they have acquired is absolute truth, free from any trace of falsehood.

In most religious seminaries, the Quran is taught as part of the curriculum. Furthermore, the Quran holds the highest status in all seminaries. Both students and teachers recite it daily. In discussions and speeches, Quranic verses are frequently referenced. The books and journals that

students read outside the curriculum generally focus on the Quran as their central theme. In this way, all students, practically speaking, receive lessons from the Quran daily, either directly or indirectly.

The same applies to Hadith. It remains a mandatory subject in the curriculum of religious seminaries. In most major seminaries, the Sihah Sitta (the six authentic collections of Hadith) or selected portions of it are taught. Additionally, in the seminary environment, students hear references to or discussions about Hadith on a daily basis. In this way, every student is consistently nourished intellectually with the teachings of the Prophet's Hadith throughout their seminary life.

This is no simple matter. It means that religious seminaries provide their students with intellectual and spiritual training that is entirely unmatched in any other educational system. While other institutions base their education on human knowledge, religious institutions ground their education in divine knowledge.

Here, I will present a few comparative examples to illustrate the differences between religious seminaries and non-religious educational institutions. These examples will highlight the distinctive qualities that set religious seminaries apart from their non-religious counterparts.

1. Secular educational institutions, whether within the country or abroad, are practically established with the objective: to enable students to secure good jobs in the world. Everywhere, job-oriented education is the norm.

In contrast, religious seminaries operate on an entirely different principle. In a single phrase, they can be described as institutions of God-oriented education. They awaken a sense of higher purpose within individuals. These seminaries elevate people from a materialistic level to a spiritual or divine level of living.

2. Secular schools, in practice, teach the lesson that the acquisition of material things is the ultimate goal of life. In contrast, religious seminaries instill in every student the mindset that material things are their needs, not their purpose.

The philosophy of secular schools conveys a message of freedom for humanity but offers no clear determination of the limits of that freedom. One result of this can be observed in modern developed countries, where unrestrained sexual relationships and hedonism prevail. Secular institutions theoretically lack any framework to curb such excesses. This is why, despite apparent advancements, genuine human progress has not been achieved in these societies.

On the other hand, religious seminaries are based on the principles of divine law. In their philosophy of education, freedom for humans is a well-defined principle, but so are its limits. They clarify when freedom is a blessing and the define point beyond which it becomes a curse. These seminaries teach that freedom is beneficial up to a certain limit, but crossing that boundary can turn it into a source of suffering.

3. The general principle found in secular educational institutions is the principle of relativity. This means that our knowledge and every theory we hold in this world are relative, not absolute. The consequence of this philosophy is that in modern educational institutions, ethics have become a relative concept. Here, every principle only holds relative value. This theory, at its extreme, transforms into the philosophy known as utilitarianism, which states that only that which has evident material utility is valuable. Anything devoid of this quality is not worthy of consideration. Under this theory, educated individuals can only turn human society into a kind of animalistic jungle. This educational system has, in practice, achieved exactly that outcome.

In contrast, the philosophy of religious seminaries is based on the principles of eternal truth. Religious seminaries have a command from God on every matter. They firmly believe that this command is entirely true and, therefore, unchangeable. It is eternally binding and must be followed. This philosophy naturally gives rise to the concept of eternal ethics, within which a stable moral system is formed, where no question of change arises in any circumstance.

4. A major gap in the secular educational system is that it lacks knowledge of the starting point in any matter. Its entire reliance is on personal experiences and observations. Due to human beings' inherent

limitations, they can never truly know the real starting point of any issue. As a result, minds trained in such institutions are perpetually fumbling intellectually and never reach the level of true knowledge.

In contrast, religious seminaries, based on divine knowledge, are in a position to identify the correct starting point in every matter right from the beginning, thus avoiding intellectual confusion.

One example of this is the philosophy of the evolution of life. In this matter, individuals educated in non-religious institutions had no known principle for the starting point. They speculated and established the hypothesis of biological evolution. For over a hundred years, numerous brilliant minds spent their lives trying to prove this hypothesis. Thousands of billions of dollars were spent. Yet, despite their lofty claims, their hypothesis remains just that—a hypothesis. Despite all the efforts, it has not advanced beyond this stage. Consequently, even the scholars who research the theory of evolution admit that it is still only a workable theory, not a proven scientific fact.

In contrast, the mind of a person trained in a religious seminary is clear from the very beginning. Based on the Quran, they are certain from day one that human life began through divine creation, not merely through the evolution of unconscious material factors. Thus, a person from a religious seminary finds the correct starting point on the very first day in matters

of biology—something that those educated in non-religious institutions have failed to find despite over a century of costly intellectual endeavours.

5. A person educated in a secular institution, based on the philosophy of life they are taught, ends up with an incomplete view of life. They know the beginning of life, but they do not know its end. They may understand where to start their activities in this world, but they have no knowledge of what their final destination is or what kind of preparation they need to make for the end of life. They may begin their life seemingly in the light, but eventually, when they reach the later stages of life, their existence ends up wandering in unknown darkness.

The situation is entirely different for a person educated in a religious seminary. The educated individual here, based on their Quranic background, is fully aware of where to begin their life's journey and what their final destination is. Such a person stands on the clear conviction that this world is merely a path, and the world of the Hereafter is the true destination.

6. In secular institutions, the prevailing philosophy of life portrays humans as pleasure-seeking animals. According to this philosophy, the natural consequence is that a person makes the pursuit of pleasure and happiness the sole purpose of their life. Consequently, today, all individuals educated in secular institutions live their lives guided by this singular objective.

This is true for people trained in secular institutions everywhere, whether they are from India or abroad.

Practical experience with this ideology reveals that it is disastrously flawed. People with this mindset spend their entire lives striving to acquire things they perceive as sources of happiness and pleasure. However, after enormous effort and accumulating a pile of desired possessions, they suddenly realize that no matter how much they have, these things cannot truly bring them happiness or pleasure. The simple reason for this is that humans, in terms of their natural capacity, possess an unlimited capacity for fulfillment. Meanwhile, everything in the world can only provide limited happiness and limited pleasure.

In essence, humans, driven by their inherent desires, seek complete satisfaction, while material things, due to their limitations, can only offer partial satisfaction. The outcome of this disparity is what is known as boredom. This gap between what is sought and what is attainable is so definitive that not even a king can bridge it. This is why we see today that, despite the overwhelming abundance of material resources in the world, what they have given humanity is only frustration, not the fulfillment for which these resources were amassed.

The situation of a person educated and trained in a religious seminary is entirely different. Such individuals emerge from their alma mater with a philosophy of life that teaches them that the present world is meant for testing, not for seeking pleasure. This perspective

fundamentally transforms their behaviour. Instead of striving for success in this world, they set their goal as success in the Hereafter. Rather than seeking luxury in this world, they aim for the attainment of Paradise in the afterlife.

This difference in mindset leads to significant outcomes. People educated in religious seminaries focus on necessity rather than luxury. They are content with the principle of contentment rather than seeking abundance. The anticipation of joy in the Hereafter lightens the burden of present sorrows. They never fall into despair because they consider whatever they receive in this world to be sufficient for themselves. Their hearts are free from negative feelings such as greed and envy, as these emotions arise from material deficiencies. Religious education prepares individuals with a non-material mindset that inherently shields them from such weaknesses.

These examples highlight the contrast between religious madrasas and secular schools. Religious madrasas aim at personality development, whereas Secular educational institutions are primarily focused on preparing students for employment. This difference is fundamental and carries significant social implications.

The distinction between religious and secular institutions discussed here is based on principles. As for practical realities, many shortcomings and deficiencies can be identified in religious seminaries. However, the key point is that the flaws in secular institutions stem directly from their principles and philosophy and are therefore an inherent

part of their system. In contrast, the shortcomings found in religious seminaries are the result of practical failings, not flaws in the philosophy of education itself.

It is a well-established fact that practical shortcomings can be addressed through corrective efforts, whereas ideological flaws cannot be resolved unless the ideology itself is deemed incorrect and rejected altogether.

Madrasa Culture

In India and other countries, the secular educational institutions are fundamentally based on a materialistic philosophy. This philosophy asserts that the visible world is all that exists, and there is no reality beyond it. Based on this philosophy, the secular education system instills in its students a mindset that prioritizes investing all their energy into material progress. It encourages them to seek as much worldly pleasure as possible, emphasizing material interests as the most significant aspect of life while disregarding non-material values.

This secular education system and culture have turned the entire world into a hub of materialism. Materialistic thinking, ethics, and activities have so thoroughly dominated people's lives that the world now resembles a forest of materialism.

In this vast desert of materialism, religious seminaries function as oases. In contrast to the secular system, religious seminaries are founded on a spiritual philosophy or non-material civilization. Their entire curriculum and

system are designed to elevate people above the material level and present an alternative to material culture through spiritual culture.

I will attempt to illustrate how this purpose is embedded in the system of religious seminaries by sharing some personal experiences from my life as a madrasa student:

1. My first experience of “Madrasa Culture” occurred at the madrasa in my village, where I received my foundational education in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic. At that time, the Urdu readers of Maulana Ismail Meerathi (d. 1917) were part of the curriculum. These readers were carefully prepared to impart valuable moral and spiritual lessons. As I read them, consciously or unconsciously, they became part of my thinking, leaving an impression that I still feel in my life today.

One of the Urdu readers contained a story narrated by the author: A camel strayed into the jungle, its bridle rope dragging on the ground. A mouse noticed it and thought, “I’ll lead this camel to my home and make it my guest.” The mouse caught hold of the camel’s rope with its teeth and began leading it toward its burrow, with the camel calmly following behind. When they arrived at the burrow, the mouse, upon seeing the stark contrast, felt deeply embarrassed. It realized that its tiny burrow was far too small to accommodate the enormous camel. The author then wrote:

“What lofty ideas the fool harboured in his heart, but how could a camel ever fit in a mouse’s burrow?”

This was the first lesson in realism that I encountered in my life. Undoubtedly, in this world, no task can be accomplished without adhering to realism, whether it concerns individual matters or collective issues.

2. During my time studying at Madrasa Al-Islah, one of my teachers was Maulana Najmuddin Islahi (d. 1995), the compiler of correspondence of Sheikh-ul-Islam. I studied several Persian texts under his guidance, such as Gulistan and Bostan. One remarkable quality of the Persian language is its rich repository of moral literature. Perhaps no other language has as many excellent books on ethics as Persian. Through these Persian texts, I gained many profound lessons in wisdom and morality.

On one occasion, the late teacher shared a Persian verse imbued with profound wisdom. The poet says that the only difference between you and me lies in how we hear. The sound that you perceive as the noise of a door closing, I interpret as the sound of a door opening:

*“Tafaawut ast miyaan-e shunidan-e man o tu
Tu ghalq-e baab o manam fath-e
baab mi shunawam”*

The late teacher explained the meaning of this couplet, though its depth was not entirely clear to me during my student days. However, the verse became a part of my memory. With further study and life experiences, its significance and depth gradually became evident. Eventually, I realized that the concept expressed in

this verse contains the greatest secret to success in this challenging world.

In this world, the individual who can achieve the greatest progress is the one whose awareness is so keen that they can discover positive aspects in seemingly negative events. They can hear the sound of a door opening in what others perceive as the sound of a door closing.

3. In the madrasa where I studied, there was much emphasis on the pre-Islamic poetry of the Arabs, as it was considered highly important for understanding the Quran. What interested me most was the abundance of wisdom found in this pre-Islamic poetry. Later studies revealed to me that the reason for this was the exceptional human qualities possessed by the Arabs of the pre-Islamic era. They were extraordinarily vibrant people, and this vitality was reflected in their poetry.

During my madrasa years, one of the verses from pre-Islamic Arab poetry that I studied and heard was as follows:

*“If a person’s honour is not sullied by disgraceful
deeds, Then whatever garment they wear will
appear beautiful.”*

From a young age, my temperament leaned toward simplicity over pretentiousness and truth over appearances. This verse, perhaps for the first time, transformed my unconscious inclinations into conscious understanding. Gradually, the importance of outward appearances faded from my mind. I began to always

look at the intrinsic reality of things. Ostentatious displays started to appear utterly meaningless to me.

4. During my student days at Madrasa Al-Islah, one of my teachers was Maulana Muhammad Ahmad Lehravi. Among the books he taught me was *Muwatta Imam Malik*. While studying this book of Hadith, one narration of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) became so deeply ingrained in my mind that it never left me. The Hadith is as follows:

Humayd ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf narrated that a person came to the Prophet and said, “O Messenger of God, teach me words by which I can live, but make sure they are few so that I do not forget them.” The Prophet of God replied, “Do not get angry.” (*Muwatta Imam Malik*, Hadith No. 3362)

Though my teacher had a somewhat fiery temperament, the explanation he gave of this Hadith became etched in my memory. From it, I learned a fundamental principle of life during my student days: that a person must live without anger, even in provocative situations.

Further study helped me understand the deeper meaning of this Hadith. It teaches that even in provocative situations, a person should respond with moderation. One must completely rid oneself of the psychology of negative reactions, even in the face of provocation.

5. Among the books I studied during my madrasa education was *Nahj al-Balagha*, a compilation of the speeches and sayings of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib. This book was taught by Maulana Akhtar Ahsan Islahi, a direct disciple of Maulana Hamiduddin Farahi. *Nahj al-Balagha* contains profound wisdom and can aptly be described as a “Book of Wisdom.” During my early education, it introduced me to insights that proved immensely valuable in my later life.

One such saying of Ali that left a deep impression on me was:

“The wise one is the one who places things in their proper place.”

This is an incredibly profound statement. Life’s matters are often very complex. In most situations, a person must navigate the maze of ideas to identify the correct thought process. They must discern the right choice among diverse options and recognize subtle differences between seemingly similar things, ensuring they avoid the mistake of incorrect assumptions.

In such scenarios, the truly wise individual, as described by Ali, is the one who can place things in their proper context. Such a person avoids incorrect reasoning, protects himself from forming misguided opinions or plans, and prevents both personal ruin and harm to others.

This wise saying greatly benefited me. It instilled in me, from the very beginning, the habit of striving for accurate analysis to arrive at sound conclusions.

6. One of the distinguished teachers at Madrasa al-Islah was Maulana Muhammad Shibli Nadwi, under whom we studied texts on Fiqh and Kalam. Among these was *Bidayat al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid* by Ibn Rushd.

His classes offered me a significant religious insight. At first, the idea was somewhat unclear to me, but with continued study, it gradually became more defined. I eventually came to understand that, in Islam, war or conflict is a secondary option, not a primary one. When a disagreement arises with an individual or a nation, the first and foremost effort should be to resolve the matter through peaceful dialogue. All possible means should be employed to reach a resolution.

In The Light of Experiences

Studying in a religious seminary does not mean that one must remain ignorant of worldly matters. It is entirely possible for a person to formally study only in a religious institution and yet become acquainted with the knowledge and sciences referred to as secular. I am an example of this. My formal education took place in a religious seminary, but after that, by the grace of God, I have studied a wide range of secular disciplines. From palmistry to astronomy, there is scarcely a field I have not explored.

The key to this achievement was that, after graduating from the madrasa, I made a personal effort to thoroughly learn the English language. Once I had mastered English, the doors to all branches of knowledge opened for me. At the

same time, following the Prophetic guidance to spread the light of divine wisdom, I began to travel extensively—both within the country and abroad. In this way, my proficiency in English, along with frequent interaction with people, enabled me to gain familiarity with a wide range of fields and disciplines. The history of madrasas shows that in every era, there have been a large number of individuals whose primary education was in a madrasa, but who later, through personal effort, also attained mastery in worldly sciences.

It is a fact that the most critical factor in acquiring knowledge is having an *open mind*. If a person avoids mental rigidity and observes and studies everything with an open heart and mind, the entire world becomes a vast classroom. Such a person learns new things every moment and gains fresh knowledge every day. Academic degrees are merely a form of recognition; true knowledge is acquired through personal effort. The door to personal effort is never closed for anyone.

In other words, the essence of expanding one's knowledge lies in adopting the mindset exemplified by Umar ibn al-Khattab, about whom it was said: "*He would learn from everyone.*" It is one of the goals of seminaries to cultivate such a learning attitude in their students, beyond formal education.

What is education? Setting aside technical discussions, the primary purpose of education is the development of the human personality. Earning a professional or vocational degree through education is an additional aspect. The true

goal of education is to awaken human consciousness and make individuals aware of the realities that are applicable in broader life.

Based on my personal experience, I can confidently say that religious seminaries, like other educational institutions, meet high standards. I am entirely a product of the seminary system. The seminary gave me the awareness and values that guided me at every step of my life's journey.

Whether it is a madrasa, college, or university, no institution can provide a person with complete knowledge, nor can it ever do so. A person reaches full maturity after the age of 35, whereas education in a madrasa or university is usually completed before this age. In such a scenario, it is impossible for any educational institution to impart complete knowledge, just as it is impossible to fit ten kilograms of milk into a one-kilogram container. Similarly, complete knowledge cannot be given to someone during their student years.

Here, I would like to quote H. A. Krebs, a Nobel laureate in chemistry. He wrote that winning a Nobel Prize does not depend on the sheer volume of information a person accumulates during their education. Instead, the most critical factor is finding an institution or teacher that instills the correct *attitude of mind*. Guided by this initial perspective, an individual progresses through personal effort and eventually reaches the level of earning a Nobel Prize.

The same principle applies to seminary education. A seminary, in itself, does not make someone a great scholar.

Its role is to provide an individual with the right mindset, enabling them to continue their academic journey in a meaningful direction, ultimately reaching the highest levels of knowledge.

A person's capacity for learning continues to grow throughout their life, and thus their pursuit of knowledge is also a lifelong journey. In this context, the most important aspect is that, during their formative period, they are given the proper direction for study and reasoning. This direction comes from both teachers and institutions. A competent teacher acts like a living library, offering the student the best guidance. Similarly, if the institutional environment is constructive and healthy, it, consciously and subconsciously, contributes to the development of the student's intellectual personality.

Here, I will symbolically mention a few personal experiences. However, this is not merely my story but the story of countless others like me who benefited from seminaries and went on to live successful lives in the world.

1. At Madrasa Al-Islah, the Quran was a special part of the curriculum. I had the opportunity to learn directly from the renowned scholar Maulana Amin Ahsan Islahi (author of *Tadabbur-e-Quran*). At that time, Maulana Islahi served as both the teacher of Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*) and the head of the madrasa.

One day, during a Quran lesson, we came across this verse from the 30th part of the Quran: "Do they not look at the camels—how they are created?" (*Quran*, 88:17)

On this occasion, Maulana Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1998) asked the students whether a camel's hooves are split or solid, like those of an ox or a horse. There were about 20 students in our class, but no one could answer with certainty. Everyone gave speculative answers, sometimes one and sometimes another.

Following this, the teacher gave a lecture. He remarked, 'Your responses suggest that you lack an understanding of the nature of a camel's hooves.' He then cited an Arabic proverb: '*La adri nisf al-ilm*,' which translates as 'To say I don't know is half of knowledge.'

He explained, "If you knew that you were unaware of the nature of a camel's hooves, then in this matter, you would already have half of the knowledge. Recognizing your ignorance would create in you a desire to complete your knowledge by finding out how a camel's hooves actually are. If the awareness of '*la adri*' (I do not know) had been awakened in you, then upon seeing a camel, you would carefully observe its hooves and transform your ignorance into knowledge."

This madrasa incident had such a profound impact on me that it became my general attitude to recognize my ignorance in every matter so that I could turn it into awareness. This spirit of intellectual inquiry was instilled in me from the early days of the madrasa. Later, I read some works by Western authors on this subject, such as *The Spirit of Inquiry*. These works revealed to me that this sense of curiosity is the foundation of all intellectual progress.

One famous example of this is that thousands of people had seen apples fall from trees, but they were unaware of their “*la adri*” (lack of knowledge) in this matter, so they remained ignorant of the truth behind it. Isaac Newton was the first person who recognized his *la adri* in this case. As a result, he reached the level of “*adri*” (knowing) and uncovered the truth about gravity.

2. As part of the madrasa curriculum, one of the books I studied on poetry and literature was *Diwan al-Hamasa*. I studied this book under Maulana Akhtar Ahsan Islahi (d. 1985), who had exceptional mastery over pre-Islamic Arab poetry. The *Diwan al-Hamasa* is a renowned anthology of Arabic poetry compiled by Abu Tammam (d. 845 CE). It features poems selected from Arab poets spanning various periods, from pre-Islamic times up to around 832 CE. During my student days, I memorized many of the poems from this collection. Some of these had a profound impact on my life. One such verse is:

“If a person fails to acquire the qualities
of nobility in his youth.

It will be very difficult for him to
achieve it in old age.”

The explanation of this verse by my esteemed teacher helped me understand a fundamental truth about life: the best time for productive work is during one’s youth. A person who fails to make use of their youth will struggle to achieve anything significant later in life.

As a result, from my student years onward, I developed the habit of not wasting any part of my time. I began to use every moment of the day and night effectively. Developing this habit of action and productivity from an early age proved immensely beneficial for me. Had I wasted my youth on trivial pursuits, I would have faced the same tragedy expressed by Mr. Rasheed Kauser Farooqi in one of his verses:

“The secret of life was revealed after the passage of time.

This story’s beginning came only after its ending.”

3. In the environment of the madrasa, the most significant aspect, practically speaking, is the five daily prayers. The system of congregational prayer holds a central position in the life of the madrasa. While prayer, in its essence, is about seeking closeness to God, its practical and outward framework is designed in such a way that it also serves as comprehensive training in what is called discipline. In this way, every madrasa essentially becomes a training center for order and discipline. The addition of discipline to the madrasa system significantly increases its importance.

The discipline instilled by the five daily prayers organizes an individual’s daily life. Their time, day and night, flows like the hands of a clock—punctual and orderly. The society formed by such disciplined individuals becomes so strong that no storm can shake it.

An illustrative remark on this aspect of discipline comes from Rustam, the Zoroastrian general of ancient

Persia, under the principle “*Al-fadhl ma shahadat bihil a'da*” (True merit is acknowledged even by adversaries). During the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, when Muslim armies entered Persia, they prayed in large congregations in open fields as there were no mosques at the time. Observing this scene of congregational prayer, Rustam exclaimed:

“Umar has pierced my heart; he is teaching discipline even to dogs!”
(*Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun*, p. 152).

During my time at the madrasa, the supervision of congregational prayers was entrusted to a senior teacher, Maulana Akhtar Ahsan Islahi (d. 1985). He would come to the hostel right after the Fajr adhan to wake the students. At that time, I was in my youth and found it hard to wake up. Maulana Islahi used to say about me: “He is a very deep sleeper.”

I recall one instance in the mosque’s open courtyard during the rows for prayer—likely during the Isha prayer—when a snake suddenly entered the mosque. It passed through the rows, heading toward the back where shoes were placed. Although the snake was not very large, it was still a snake. Yet, I observed that there was no panic or commotion in the congregation. Everyone remained in their positions, and the snake passed through and exited. This incident gave me firsthand experience of how prayer instills discipline in individuals.

One time, after prayer, the head of the madrasa, Maulana Amin Ahsan Islahi stood up in the mosque to deliver a speech. He said, “In prayer, you are taught to act collectively. This teaching is not limited to the mosque; your life outside the mosque must also be lived with the same discipline and unity.” He was an exceptional speaker. During his speech, he used several verbs from the *Bab Tafaa’ul* (a form in Arabic grammar that conveys the meaning of cooperation and participation), such as *tawaafuq* (agreement), *tashaark* (partnership), and *ta’aamul* (interaction).

In this way, the practice of congregational prayer five times a day in every madrasa teaches unity and discipline. Thus, every madrasa functions as a training center for order and discipline in practical terms.

Those who know me are aware that I possess an exceptional degree of order and discipline in my temperament. Discipline has become my second nature. This trait is likely the result of the consistent training I received during my madrasa years. The discipline of worship instilled in the madrasa became so deeply embedded in my nature that it has never left me.

In this context, it would be accurate to say that every madrasa is essentially a training center for discipline. It serves as a lifelong institution for teaching individuals how to live life in an organized and disciplined manner.

4. An incident from my time at the madrasa remains profoundly instructive. I wrote about this in one of my essays titled *Haalaat Badal Sakte Hain* (“Circumstances

Can Change”), which was published in the Dhul-Qadah–Dhul-Hijjah 1383 AH (estimated March–April 1964 CE) issue of the Urdu monthly *Al-Furqan* (Lucknow). The incident is reproduced here from the pages of *Al-Furqan*:

“It was around 1940. A severe drought had struck our region. The monsoon season was passing, but there was no sign of rain anywhere. Farmers would look to the sky every morning, hoping for clouds, but not a single one appeared. Eventually, when despair reached its peak, the idea arose to offer the *Salat al-Istisqa* (prayer for rain). About two kilometers from Madrasa Al-Islah, a field was chosen, where the madrasa students, teachers, and Muslims from the surrounding villages gathered. The late Maulana Muhammad Saeed, who was then a teacher at Madrasa Al-Islah and from whom I studied Hadith, led the *Salat al-Istisqa* and offered supplications for rain.”

“I clearly remember that day. We traveled under the scorching sun to reach the field and performed the prayer drenched in sweat. However, as we returned, it started raining on the way. Some people sought shelter under trees, while others ran home, getting drenched. (*Al-Furqan*, p. 44)”

This experience made me feel as though I was witnessing divine assistance with my own eyes. For me, it became a tangible demonstration of the belief: “Ask, and it shall be given to you; knock, and it shall be opened for you.” At the time, I was about 15 years old, an age when experiences leave a profound and lasting impression. Consequently, this experience became a permanent part of my consciousness, deeply embedded in my personality and never to be separated from me.

Such experiences are unique to the environment of religious seminaries. A madrasa not only serves as a place for acquiring knowledge but also as a means of spiritual training. In the madrasa environment, a person repeatedly receives nourishment in the form of trust in God and awareness of the Hereafter. The result is that individuals moulded in the madrasa environment become a blend of knowledge and spirituality, unlike the one-dimensional individuals often produced by secular educational institutions.

The training I received at the madrasa remained my greatest asset in the later phase of my life. No great task can be undertaken without trust in God—and this was the very treasure I gained from the madrasa. In terms of my life’s purpose, I had to rely more on God than on material resources. Remaining firm on such a difficult decision was, for the most part, made possible by this madrasa training.

The revival of the prophetic mission that I adopted in my life meant, in the language of Hadith, standing for

the unfamiliar religion as opposed to the commonly practiced and widely accepted version. Without doubt, this is the most difficult mission under the sky. In such a journey, one must walk alone. It is easier to cross mountains and oceans than to carry forward a path based on unfamiliar religion.

By the grace of God, I remained steadfast on this most difficult mission, despite every kind of obstacle and unfavourable condition. Until finally, the atmosphere began to change. To witness this outcome, I had to undergo a long and testing wait of nearly 40 years, until the launch of the Al-Risala monthly in 1976. And such waiting would not have been possible without complete trust in God.

A Non-Political Empire

The educational scheme introduced by Lord Macaulay aimed to assimilate the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent into English culture. If, at that time, the scholars of India had reacted by inciting a storm of protests against Lord Macaulay, throwing bombs at the British Viceroy, or setting English schools and colleges on fire, it would have achieved nothing. On the contrary, such negative actions might have further exacerbated the destruction of Muslims, as witnessed in the aftermath of the violent events of 1857.

Instead, the Islamic scholars devised a counter-educational plan against Lord Macaulay's scheme. Quietly and systematically, they began establishing madrasas across the country.

Whenever you initiate a plan, the first and foremost consideration is whether it is sustainable under real-world conditions. In this world, any plan takes a long time to yield results. For instance, an oak tree requires a hundred years to grow into its full form. Similarly, national projects also reach fruition only over extended periods. In such circumstances, no plan can be successful if it creates a short-lived stir and then suddenly collapses. A true plan is one that has the capacity to endure continuously in the flow of history.

The movement of religious madrasas was precisely such a sustainable initiative. As a result, it continued uninterrupted after its inception. It thrived throughout the second half of the 19th century, persisted through the 20th century, and has now entered the 21st century successfully.

Over this period, thousands of schools, madrasas, and *darul ulooms* (universities) were established across India. Eventually, a vast network of religious institutions and educational centers emerged throughout the country, educating generations upon generations.

It is well known that knowledge is not confined to any single domain of life. Directly or indirectly, knowledge is interconnected with all spheres of life. Thus, approximately 150 years of relentless educational efforts have culminated in a reality that may not be an exaggeration to describe: Muslims in India now have a non-political, religious, and community-based empire. Based on its diverse characteristics, this empire is far more significant and enduring than the former political empires.

The manifestations of this non-political empire can be observed everywhere today, every single day—towering mosques in various parts of the country, grand buildings of madrasas, modern and well-equipped religious and community-based institutions, massive gatherings and conferences happening almost daily, the majestic tours and travels of Muslim leaders, and the extensive availability of modern facilities such as cars, telephones (or smart phone), fax machines, and computers in Muslim institutions.

These numerous phenomena are widespread today, introducing the concept of this non-political empire. In their silent language, they proclaim that the Muslim community in this region now enjoys great opportunities, surpassing even those available during the era of political power. What was once limited to a single royal family during the era of political rule is now accessible to the entire Muslim community.

The defining feature of the scholars' educational movement was its sustainability—a crucial quality that enabled it to embrace future opportunities. Had it not been sustainable, it would have collapsed—like many short-lived initiatives—before modern possibilities even appeared, and thus could never have integrated those emerging opportunities into its growth.

Historical events show that Muslims lamented the loss of their political empire for an extended period. However, Allah, in His wisdom, brought about such changes in history that far greater doors of opportunity were opened for them. It is now possible to establish a non-political empire that is far more meaningful and beneficial than a political empire in various respects.

As a result of nearly 150 years of continuous effort, a peaceful, non-political empire has been established for Muslims in this region. Every mosque, madrasa, and Muslim institution is an unshakable pillar of this empire. Today, the survival and stability that the Muslim community enjoys in this country is due to these countless institutions. Without them, no monarch could have provided such stability.

This transformation was made possible by the advent of the modern era. The changes of modern times have rendered political power secondary in importance, with institutions now being the true source of strength. Today, at the institutional level, it is possible to achieve—with even greater efficiency—all that was previously hoped for, albeit in limited scope, through political power.

A political empire is built on military strength, while a non-political empire is established on the strength of institutions and organizations. A political empire builds monuments to glorify one person or a select group, while a non-political empire creates structures that serve and benefit the entire community or nation. A political empire symbolizes one ruling over another, whereas a non-political empire ensures the collective welfare of all humanity.

By the grace of God, this non-political empire has been fully established for the Muslims of this region.

The Changing Era

It is mentioned in a Hadith: “Indeed, the Prophets used to govern the religious affairs of the Children of Israel.” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 7960).

This was not exclusive to the Children of Israel; in ancient times, this was the case with all nations. The Prophets of each nation were responsible for overseeing and managing their affairs. Consequently, Prophets were sent continuously in those times (*Quran*, 23:44), until the appearance of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), after whom the chain of Prophethood was brought to an end.

Now the question arises: who is responsible for the supervision and guidance of the vast Ummah of the Prophet Muhammad, spread across the world? The answer is that this responsibility does not lie with political rulers but with the scholars of the Ummah. This is articulated in another Hadith: “Indeed, the scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets.” (*Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith No. 243). Another narration states: “The scholars of my Ummah are like the Prophets of the Children of Israel.” Although this Hadith is weak in terms of its chain of transmission, its meaning is strengthened by other narrations.

It is now the responsibility of the Ulama to perform the same work for which earlier prophets were sent. Broadly speaking, this entails two primary responsibilities: guiding the people in the light of the Quran and the Sunnah, and introducing Islam to the world at large.

A question arises here: this is a monumental responsibility. When Prophets fulfilled this role, they were aided by the divine assistance of angels, which guaranteed their success. Now that such assistance is no longer forthcoming, how can this immense responsibility be carried out?

The answer was provided in advance by the Quran: “So do not fear them, but fear Me.” (*Quran*, 5:3)

This verse signifies that the revolution brought about by the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions has initiated a new era in world history. According to the Quran, the era of fearing humans has ended. Now, it is no longer possible for anyone to obstruct the path of God's religion. All avenues have been fully opened, and any hindrance will arise only due to the internal shortcomings of Muslims, not external oppression.

In the age of monarchies, proclaiming the oneness of God could cost one their life (*Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith No. 3612). However, God has now replaced the old autocratic political systems with democratic governance, granting every individual complete freedom to adopt and propagate any belief they choose.

In ancient times, ordinary people lacked resources for significant endeavours. The economy was predominantly agrarian, with the king as the sole owner of arable land. As a result, ordinary people had no means for religious work. In the modern era, God has unleashed an "industrial explosion," flooding the world with economic resources. Today, even without government support, individuals can acquire significant wealth and undertake monumental projects. For example, in India, large religious institutions akin to universities now operate entirely on private funding, a rarity in the past.

In the past, communication was constrained by the limits of transportation—travel depended on animals, which could cover only short distances, and messages faced the same delays. Today, a communication revolution has transformed this reality: you can cross the globe in hours and send a message anywhere in minutes. Thanks to the printing press,

millions of book copies can be produced and distributed, reaching countless homes.

These modern tools and platforms are now being widely used to dispel the misunderstandings that have spread in the name of religion, and to make people aware of the true message of God. Most of those directly or indirectly involved in this mission come from religious madrasas. I, too, consider myself a part of this caravan of madrasas.

Most of these significant changes have come about through non-Muslim nations. It would not be wrong to say that God has indirectly utilized these nations for the service of His religion. Perhaps this is the truth hinted at by the Prophet Muhammad in this Hadith: “Indeed, God will support this religion even through secular people.” (*Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith No. 6232).

The flood of opportunities and resources available today is undoubtedly a great blessing for the Islamic scholars. By God’s grace, many among the scholars have understood this divine plan and, utilizing modern resources, have strived to fulfill the duties of renewing and reviving Islam.

I consider myself among those working to promote intellectual growth and spirituality through the lens of religion. By the grace of God, I have utilized all modern means—press conferences, radio, television, the internet, and more—to spread the message of peace, spirituality, and intellectual development. I am, in every sense, a product of a traditional religious madrasa. In that regard, I can say that my work—centered on peace and spirituality—is a natural extension of the mission carried out through the madrasa system. The primary credit for this belongs to the religious madrasas, and secondarily, to myself and my companions.

Madaris Center

There is a need to establish a central institution under the name *Madaris Center*. This center will be a collective effort to achieve the goals that individual madrasas are currently striving to accomplish independently.

1. *Creating Unity Among Madrasas*: The first objective of the Madaris Center will be to foster an atmosphere of unity among madrasas. This center will act as a unifying thread for the various madrasas. The role of the Madaris Center will be to make this unity more effective and meaningful, functioning as the collective voice of madrasas.

2. *Providing Access to Global Information*: The present age is marked by an information explosion. For this reason, every major institution includes departments that keep it connected with contemporary knowledge and trends. One function of the Madaris Center will be to collect global information related directly or indirectly to madrasas and keep them informed. Among the characteristics of a believer described in Hadith is: "To be aware of their time." (*Sahih Ibn Hibban*, Vol. 2, p. 78)

The information division of the Madaris Center will fulfill this need for madrasa communities, equipping them with contemporary knowledge.

3. As is well known, the contemporary madrassa curriculum is broadly divided into two categories of knowledge:

The first, '*Uloom-e-Aaliyah*, pertains exclusively to the core Islamic texts—the Quran and Hadith—and does not extend to their commentaries. These sacred texts are preserved in their original form and

remain unchanged. However, the explanatory and interpretive literature that accompanies them is subject to continuous revision in order to address the evolving needs of the time.

In contrast, the auxiliary sciences are not considered sacred and are fully adaptable to the demands of changing eras. Just as secular educational systems regularly update their curricula, it is equally essential to consistently revise these auxiliary disciplines to remain relevant and effective.

4. The current madrasa curriculum includes minimal focus on the Quran, Seerah (the Prophetic biography), and Islamic history. This gap needs to be filled. Similarly, Hadith is not taught as an independent discipline but is instead covered under the umbrella of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). This approach also requires reconsideration and reform.

Additionally, the curriculum contains substantial content under the category of "*Firaq-e-Daallah*" (deviant sects), focusing on ancient sects that have now practically vanished. Instead, students should be educated about contemporary misguided ideologies rather than extinct ones.

Moreover, the traditional rational sciences (ma'qulat) in the curriculum have largely lost their relevance. They should be replaced with works on modern rational disciplines, enabling students to understand Islam within a contemporary framework and to explain it clearly in today's intellectual discussions.

These and several other aspects necessitate a thorough revision of the current curriculum. Such revisions can only be accomplished through the cooperation of madrasas. One of the major tasks of the *Madaris Center* will be to facilitate the conditions required for this important revision.

5. It would be fair to say that the current curriculum of madrasas is largely focused on reforming the Muslim community and promoting religious understanding. The intention of those who designed this curriculum was likely to prepare students in such a way that, after graduating from the madrasa, they could effectively carry out the work of religious guidance within the community and raise awareness of divine values at a universal level.

While this was an appropriate approach at the time, the world has now changed so significantly that, in practice, our madrasas are training speakers and writers for an audience that no longer exists. For example, the curriculum equips students to intellectually counter the ancient Mu'tazilah sect, but it does not prepare them to address the modern rationalists who embody similar ideologies today. Similarly, students are trained in the art of traditional debate (munazara), even though this method has become obsolete and has been replaced globally by serious and constructive dialogue. However, madrasa graduates are often not equipped to participate effectively in such modern forms of dialogue.

Additionally, these graduates are trained in the old methods of analogical reasoning, whereas today's

intellectual discourse is dominated by scientific logic, which they are not familiar with. These and similar shortcomings highlight the need for the madrasa curriculum to adapt to contemporary realities and prepare students to engage with the challenges of the modern world effectively.

6. One of the proposed steps is to establish a department, possibly named *Ma'had al-'Ulama* (Scholars' Institute) or something similar, with the aim of preparing scholars to meet contemporary demands. Selected young scholars can be invited for a fixed period, where they will be equipped with proficiency in English and sufficient modern knowledge. This will enable them to effectively represent Islam in the modern age using contemporary styles and approaches.

In this context, I would like to share my personal experience, which may serve as a practical lesson for others. During my madrasa education, I acquired basic English skills. However, the desire to further develop my proficiency in English and use it as a medium to convey Islam's message to modern audiences emerged later in my life, ultimately becoming my life's mission.

There are various reasons behind how the desire to use the English language as a means of communication for religious guidance and divine awareness among people developed within me. One of these reasons, without doubt, is related to the scholars of Islam.

In the modern era, many scholars have realized that serving Islam effectively in contemporary contexts

requires learning Western languages. For instance, Maulana Shibli Nomani attempted to learn French from Professor Arnold in Aligarh, although he could not complete his studies. During my time at Madrasa Al-Islah, I observed my teacher, Maulana Akhtar Ahsan Islahi, trying to read English books with the help of a dictionary. However, I do not know how far his efforts progressed.

A particularly instructive example in this regard is related to Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi. This incident, summarized here from Maulana Manazir Ahsan Gilani's book, illustrates the importance of learning languages like English for the purpose of introducing Islam.

During his Hajj journey in 1878, Maulana Nanautawi was approached by the European captain of the ship, who asked him some religious questions. The answers were conveyed through a translator. The captain was deeply impressed by his responses. Following this encounter, Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi felt that the conversation with the captain could have been more effective through direct speech without an interpreter. The only possible meaning of this is that, even in his time, Maulana considered learning languages like English—essential for a positive introduction of religion in the modern era—as part of his religious efforts (*dini mujahidat*) (*Sawanih Qasmi*, by Maulana Manazir Ahsan Gilani, published by Darul Uloom Deoband, Vol. 2, pp. 299-300).

7. I never enrolled in any English school, but after completing my madrasa education, I learned the English language through years of personal effort. I reached a level where I could directly read all kinds of English books and extract the necessary material from them. For nearly forty years, I have been continuously striving to present a positive introduction to Islam among English-speaking circles, both within India and abroad.

It was my proficiency in both Arabic and English that enabled me to launch an international mission focused on peace and spirituality. While the foundation of this mission had been laid much earlier, its formal initiation in the English language took place in 1984 with the launch of the monthly *Al-Risala* from New Delhi. By the grace of God, it continues to be published Under the title of *Spirit of Islam* to this day and has become a powerful medium for presenting a positive image of Islam to English-speaking audiences, both in India and around the world. In addition to the magazine, dozens of English books have been published as part of this mission and are now reaching a global readership—even extending to the digital world, where a dedicated website has been established.

It is a special blessing from God that this peaceful mission has become a means of introducing Islam in a positive light on an international scale. Many of God's servants have joined me in this divine mission and are helping to carry it forward with dedication and commitment.

After completing my studies in Arabic and religious sciences, acquiring an understanding English language proved extremely beneficial for me. It is the result of this dual knowledge that I was able to represent Islam at international conferences. Within the country and abroad, I was repeatedly given such opportunities. Had I been unfamiliar with the English language, it would not have been possible for me to use the opportunities of the modern age to present Islam in such a positive manner.

8. On May 17, 2001, a representative from an English newspaper in Delhi visited me. He was a young Hindu journalist named Mr. Kartikeya Sharma. He said he was working on a story for his newspaper about Islamic religious madrasas. He mentioned that despite extensive searching, he could not find any books on madrasas in English and asked for my help in this regard.

This and similar experiences made me realize that there is almost no comprehensive book introducing madrasas in the English language. This is undoubtedly a significant gap. As is well known, many small and large books about madrasas are available in Urdu and Arabic. However, no notable books on this subject have been published in Hindi, English, or other languages. This is a considerable deficiency. There is an urgent need to prepare a comprehensive book introducing Islamic madrasas and publish it in Hindi, English, and other languages so that non-Muslims can gain an accurate understanding of these institutions.

One of the key tasks of the *Madaris Center* will be to prepare and publish such introductory books and arrange for their translation into various languages. Publication by the *Madaris Center* would ensure that the book is regarded as an authoritative resource on the subject, helping readers gain an accurate understanding of Islamic madrasas.

A positive introduction to Islamic madrasas holds significant importance from various perspectives. One aspect is that it highlights the immense value Islam places on education. It also demonstrates how Muslim educational institutions are engaged in fostering religious, spiritual, and constructive thought processes. Additionally, it showcases how, in a country like India, Muslims have successfully sustained their educational system through their internal efforts, operating it independently and effectively as an autonomous sector, and continue to do so with success in various contexts.

Another critical task of the *Madaris Center* will be to systematically address and dispel misconceptions about madrasas. While it is true that these misconceptions are baseless, they are so widespread that ignoring them would not be appropriate under any circumstances.

Here is an incident worth mentioning. Some time ago, a senior official of the Government of India visited me after prior appointment. He said he wanted to consult me on a specific issue. He explained that in November 1999, when an Indian Airlines flight was hijacked and taken from Nepal to Kandahar, he had traveled to

Kandahar to help resolve the issue. There, he met some Afghan youth. During their interaction, they asked these youths if they would be interested in visiting India for tourism. They replied affirmatively. When asked which places in India they would like to see, the first name they mentioned was Deoband. Upon further inquiry, they explained that their interest in visiting Deoband stemmed from the fact that they identified themselves as Deobandis.

The senior official's conversation revealed that he believed Deoband might be a training center for militancy. He thought it might be the ideological hub for the violence persisting in Afghanistan and along India's borders.

Hearing this, I smiled and replied, "I am a Deobandi too." I explained that I studied at Madrasa Al-Islah, a school founded by Maulana Asghar Hussain of Deoband, a student of Sheikh-ul-Hind Maulana Mahmood Hasan. I then clarified that Deobandi or Deobandiyat refers to a school of thought that emphasizes adherence to the Sunnah. It was in this sense that the Afghan youth identified themselves as Deobandis, as the people of Afghanistan have a long history of travelling to Deoband for religious education. They have also traditionally relied on Deoband's scholars for their jurisprudential guidance. This has no connection whatsoever with political violence or militancy.

After my explanation, the official was fully satisfied.

Misconceptions about religious madrasas are widespread across the country. These very misconceptions give

rise to various allegations against madrasas, such as proposals to create laws to control them, calls from some quarters for their “Indianization,” or claims that madrasas hinder national unity or fail to cultivate a sense of nationalism. Some even assert that as long as these madrasas exist, the country’s overall development is unattainable because they prevent Muslims from integrating into the national mainstream.

These accusations are undoubtedly baseless and unfounded. With sincere and strategic efforts, such misconceptions can certainly be eliminated. One of the secondary or ancillary functions of the proposed *Madaris Center* will be to refute these misunderstandings appropriately and inform people about their baselessness in a timely manner. Addressing misconceptions is also an Islamic duty, referred to in the Quran as *tabyeen* (clarification).

The primary and constructive role of the *Madaris Center* will be to increase awareness about madrasas and their systems. It will present an accurate and truthful picture of madrasas. The reality is that a proper introduction to madrasas itself serves as an effective and definitive rebuttal to the misconceptions against them.

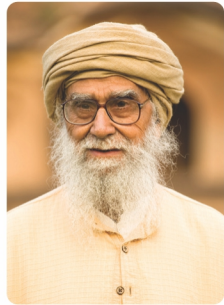
Another important task of the *Madaris Center* will be to gather information about the madrasas scattered across the country. It will strive to foster unity among them and work towards achieving their shared goals. It will bring the madrasas out of their isolated individual spheres and integrate them into a broader collective framework.

In summary, the *Madaris Center* will serve as a unifying body for madrasas internally and as a collective representative externally. On the one hand, it will symbolize the stability of madrasas, and on the other, it will act as a guardian of their universality. With the establishment of the *Madaris Center*, both the utility and strength of madrasas will see significant enhancement. The *Madaris Center* will essentially serve as the non-political capital of a non-political empire. It will function as the center of the Muslim community while simultaneously being the center of madrasas.

ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Islamic education means learning in the light of Islam. A madrasa is an institution devoted to the Islamic sciences, encompassing both revealed and rational disciplines. Guided by the Quran's first command to "Read," this tradition spans from early mosque based schools to modern institutions. By integrating both branches of knowledge within the framework of Shariah, Islamic education plays a key role in shaping Muslim societies, fostering spiritual insight and social development. Historic madrasas and India's enduring Madrasa Movement demonstrate how scholars have built resilient networks to preserve and share knowledge through centuries, highlighting the peaceful pursuit of learning.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021) was an Islamic scholar, spiritual guide, and ambassador of peace. His English translation of the Quran and its Commentary are widely appreciated for their simplicity, clarity, and ease of understanding. He has authored over 200 books; and two magazines, *Spirit of Islam* and *Al-Risala*; and recorded thousands of video and audio lectures. Demonstrating the relevance of Islam in the modern idiom, this material delves into Islam's spiritual wisdom, the Prophet's non-violent approach, its relationship with modernity, and other contemporary issues. For his seminal contributions to world peace, Maulana received numerous national and international awards. The Government of India honoured him with the 'Padma Vibhushan Award' (2021), and the 'Padma Bhushan Award' (2000) for his contributions to spirituality. In 2001, Maulana founded the Centre for Peace and Spirituality International which is actively carrying his legacy forward by peacefully conveying the spiritual message of Islam at a global level.



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