

Deeni Madaris: ‘Asri Manuwiyyat aur Jadid Taqaze- an Urdu translation of “What is a Madrasa?” by Ebrahim Moosa. Translated by Waris Mazhari, Deoband, Naimia Islamic Store, 2017

-Javed Akhatar

Madrasa (an Islamic learning institution) owns a vital and meaningful status in the Muslim world. It is an Islamic educational need of a large section of the Muslims in India and Pakistan. Unfortunately, the academic world has not given much attention to its fervour, functions and contributions, in addition, today factors such as the appearance of the fundamentalist groups, terrorist attacks allegations such as 9/11 and anti-Muslim hate sentiments, all these have made madrasas a much talked about the subject today. The translated book is meant to introduce the madrasa as a learning institution to unfamiliar audiences like Americans who may have erroneously taken the madrasa to be a home for sheltering terrorism. The book aims to provide an insider’s perspective like its historical formation, pedagogy, texts, and the continuing debate surrounding the relevance of madrasas.

Deeni Madaris is structured into four parts spread across twelve chapters. The writer of the book accentuates in the book that he only came to realize the fruits of madrasa study once he encountered modern knowledge and learning.

The part one, titled “*Aqli Tajurbaat*” (chapters one to three) is an autobiographical account (sharing six-year residence in the madrasa) of a novice to that of an aspirant. This section is devoted to going over the concept of the madrasa as not merely a place to study theological and philosophical texts but also directs for piety and goodness. In this section, the author of the book actually navigates the readers through his lived experiences with his time at the madrasa.

The second part, bearing the title “*Tarikh aur Tanazur*” (chapters four to six), presents a revealing description of the contemporary madrasas formation in India and Pakistan. This section also serves to know contemporary theological separations among various madrasa factions, i.e., *Deobandis*, *Barelvis* and *Ahl al-Ḥadith*.

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Readers are given snapshots of the famous Nizami curriculum, texts and subjects used in the curriculum and the various phases of its development. Significantly, the book also discusses the hotly debated topic of curriculum reform offering author's own point of view on the issue. He contends that the complexity of the Nizami curriculum should be placed at the level of post-graduate study.

The third part, containing the title "*Ilm ki Siyasat*" (chapters seven and eight), shifts from the madrasas historical formation to contemporary ethnography. It marks how people who are part of the madrasa educational system view themselves as embodiments of the life and the teachings of the Prophet (pbuh). The book also provides readers with glimpses of what goes on in female madrasas together with the sort of curriculum they pursue. It repeatedly reminds readers that a madrasa is a place where "*excellence in knowledge is always secondary to moral formation*" and allow me to tell that the author is courageous enough to articulate his dissatisfaction with this actuality. The section terminates here by untying the complexity of Islamic and modern epistemology.

In the fourth, titled "*Madaris 'Alami Tanazir Mein*" (chapters nine to twelve) argues the negative and often ill-informed media caricatures of madrasas. These labels and stereotype are erected throughout media outlets sooner or later ending undying negative images in the psyche of many uninformed audiences especially Americans. The author considers these views to be "gross distortions" of reality and blaming the madrasas as a hub of producing suicide bombers and terrorists is only a myth created by the powerful print and electronic media. The section concludes with the two letters, which is also one of the most important and unique features of the book, one to policy makers in the west and one to his former madrasa teachers to ponder over the future of the madrasas, the career options of their graduates and the curriculum reforms.

This important translated book combines helpful summaries of a deep knowledge of the Islamic tradition and guides us through major historical concepts, religious doctrines and topics under discussion. This study fills this lacuna and is grounded in a detailed empirical investigation. The book critically examines the existing Madrasa education system including curriculum designing, assessment and evaluation etc. It offers the first-hand knowledge of the world of the madrasas with a balanced overview. I hope the policymakers, researchers, educators, students and scholars especially Urdu circle will benefit from this book and I think, certainly, Deeni Madaris is a well-timed contribution to a topic with great local and global appeal.
