

MADRASAS ARE FACING AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN UTTAR PRADESH

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Minorities Incl. Linguistic Minorities - Schemes & their performance; Mechanisms, Laws, Institutions & Bodies

Muslim clerics and managers of madrasas attend a conference convened by Islamic seminary Darul Uloom Deoband in Saharanpur on October 30, 2022. | Photo Credit: PTI

There has been a lot of unhappiness about the Yogi Adityanath government's decision to conduct [a survey of unrecognised madrasas](#) in Uttar Pradesh. The government's claim — of the survey being [an exercise to help the madrasas and their students](#) — has been less than convincing. In the past, the government has called into question the patriotism of madrasa students by asking their management to hoist the national flag on Independence Day, record the proceedings, and submit the same to the local magistrate.

Yet, the fact remains that unrecognised, irregular madrasas could do with some help. Most are floundering for lack of direction. Many impart elementary theological instruction through semi-educated teachers. If at all there, secular education is, at best, piecemeal. Madrasas depend almost fully on community funding. And with the economic downturn — first post-demonetisation and then post-COVID-19 — that funding has reduced to a trickle. Under normal circumstances, an institute pressed for funds cuts down on expansion plans or puts new courses on hold. Here, it has become an existential crisis for tens of thousands of students. The dwindling community sponsorship has translated into less food to eat and no warm clothes for them. If that makes it seem as though the madrasas' prime purpose is to feed and clothe the needy, the reality is not entirely different. Most students are first-generation learners. Many of them are sent by parents with the idea that there will be one less mouth to feed at home. For poverty-stricken parents, the madrasas' free boarding and lodging is a blessing. The education is often considered a bonus. The much-maligned madrasas feed the hungry and impart literacy.

Today, it is becoming challenging to operate madrasas in Uttar Pradesh. For instance, Jamiatul Hamd in Gautam Buddha Nagar district is a rare madrasa which encouraged its students to take the Central Board of Secondary Education exams alongside learning to be Hafiz-e-Quran (one who has memorised the Quran). The madrasa is so short of funds that the management does not know where the next meal for the students will come from. In the past, Good Samaritans sent packs of rice, lentils, wheat flour and cooking oil. Such sponsorship has come down drastically, leaving the students with the prospect of going to bed hungry. Most of them also do not have blankets to cover themselves in the coming winter. Also, 40% of the students in this madrasa who went back home during the COVID-19 pandemic did not return.

The scene is not too different at the Jamia Mahad-e-Noor madrasa in Dadri, where 30% of the students dropped out after COVID-19. Day scholars face an uncertain future. Some teachers could not be retained due to paucity of funds.

Meanwhile, the cash-strapped Jamia Naseeriya Islamia in Ghaziabad closed down its wing for outstation students. In mosques across Uttar Pradesh, community aid is sought for unrecognised madrasas after daily prayers. In almost every madrasa, there are lingering apprehensions about their fate after the survey. Many packed off their outstation students in panic when the survey started. The students may never return.

Incidentally, these schools had also sent back their outstation students after the nationwide

lockdown was imposed in March 2020. Many students did not return as their parents got them employed as either farm labourers or at sundry tea shops or eateries. A student who may have at one time dreamed of becoming a scholar of Islam is now a menial worker.

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Most madrasas stayed shut for more than 18 months during the pandemic. But unlike public schools, they imparted no online instruction as most children studying in these madrasas had no access to smartphones at home. Even a seminary like Darul Uloom, Deoband could not continue online instruction for this reason.

The fear of the survey has only made things worse. Students of madrasas which do not have an electricity connection and use just a handpump to provide water are particularly vulnerable. Ownership documents are not exactly foolproof. As more and more parents withdraw their children from madrasas, and many seminaries send back outstation students, learning may come to a full stop for thousands of youngsters.

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