Prioritizing Epistemology and Morality for Sustainable Societal Peace in Pakistan: An Integrated Approach to Religious and General Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Madaris in Pakistan's educational system and their alleged connection to radicalization and extremism due to a lack of emphasis on critical thinking, morality, and exclusive religious epistemological sources. In contrast to the prevalent simplifications attributing their function to Madaris, this paper argues that the conventional general education system has also failed to prioritise morality and inclusive epistemology in its curricula. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a more nuanced approach to the analysis of the education system, and it is argued that a comprehensive approach that acknowledges both inclusive epistemology and morality is required for an environment conducive to the maintenance of sustainable societal harmony. The paper argues that by employing such an approach, students can appreciate diversity and diverse perspectives, develop critical thinking skills, and be better equipped to promote social cohesion and peace.

Keywords: Education; Madrasa reforms; knowledge; molarity; extremism; Pakistan

Introduction

The educational system in Pakistan has been a subject of discourse, with concerns raised regarding its capacity to intensify societal division (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2014; Khattak, 2014; Rahman, 2004). In addition, scholars have expressed notable criticism regarding the widespread existence of Islamic religious seminaries, commonly known as Madaris, which offer students a conventional or traditional Islamic education. Although Madaris have long been an integral part of Pakistan's educational system (Jabeen, 2022; Aliyu, 2015; Hanif et al., 2021), they have been criticised for their alleged role in promoting extremism and radicalization.

The criticism on Madaris stems from the concern that they provide an environment conducive to fostering extremist ideologies, as well as a lack of emphasis on critical thinking and detachment from modern education (Basit, 2015; Billquist & Colbert, 2006; Iqbal et al., 2023).

The literature alludes to examples illuminating how education is programmed to organize a society and repel the 'others' while implanting a shared consciousness (socially constructed common desire and meaning). Such literature has attempted to build an account of Madaris (Ahmed & Shahzad, 2021; Malla, 2021; Zaidi, 2013; Ahmed, 2016) to illustrate a more extensive theoretical basis for propagating disharmony and radical world views. In Pakistan, the proliferation of Madaris has been seen as a response to the state's failure to provide basic educational facilities, particularly in rural areas where poverty, underdevelopment, social and economic inequalities and illiteracy rates are high.

This paper aims to examine the increase in enrolment in Madaris, despite the

negative portrayal and marginalization of these institutions, mainly in the aftermath of 9/11 (e.g., Andrabi et al., 2006; Candland, 2005). Hence, the complex issue raises important questions about the effectiveness of counter-violent extremism strategies and the need for reform in the Madaris education system (Bashir & Ul-Haq, 2019). Here the intent is not to disregard the importance of religion and/or religious education in (Islamic) identity development but to contend that such an exclusivist education plays a pivotal role in reinforcing identities (i.e., 'us' vs. 'them') to achieve ideological hegemony or dominance.

The paper further explores the importance of morality in education, especially at the primary school level, and how it differs from the emphasis on ideology in education. It argues that an education system that prioritizes morality over ideology is fundamental to establishing a strong and meaningful relationship between the self and the others in society. The paper highlights the universal nature of morality and how it promotes a sense of shared values and a common understanding among individuals and society. It also discusses how morality promotes critical thinking, empathy, inclusivity, social cohesion, and a sense of social responsibility to ensure sustainable societal peace.

Madaris and Criticisms

Many argue that during the late 1970s, Islam (as a religion) was misused to control and reengineer Pakistani society. For instance, the era witnessed the implementation of several policies aimed at Islamising the country (Shah, 2012; Burki, 2016). Islamic Hadood laws based on the Shariah (Islamic law) were introduced in 1979 to regulate socio-economic life (Kennedy, 1988). The Council of Islamic Ideology (an advisory body) was also established to guide the state on Islamic principles and laws. However, the Council introduced several controversial policies, and critics argue that these policies have led to the persecution and marginalization of religious minorities in the country (e.g., Faqir, 2020; Shah, 2012).

Despite the controversies, as mentioned above, some believe the Islamisation campaign was necessary to counter or resist the perceived threat posed by Westernization and secularism (i.e., post-modernist agenda). The argument entails that Pakistan is an Islamic state; hence, its laws and policies must reflect its Islamic identity. However, others point out that Islamisation has done more damage than good, leading to the politicization of religion, the rise of sectarianism, and the erosion of social cohesion and tolerance in the country (e.g., Afzal et al., 2012; Kennedy, 1988).

Furthermore, the state-sponsored or sanctioned Madrasa system expanded during the 1980s and 1990s, allegedly resulting in the proliferation of extremist ideologies in Pakistan (Ahmad, 1998; Malla, 2021; Basit, 2015; Afzal et al., 2012). Regardless of the intentions, such a religiously driven shift profoundly impacted the broader Pakistani society, particularly the education system.

In a scathing analysis of the curriculum and quality of Madaris education, it is suggested that many Madaris continue to rely on outdated and narrow curricula that tend to focus exclusively on religious education (Sodhar & Rasool, 2013). This not only limits the employment opportunities for graduates of these institutions (i.e., contributing to the national economy) but is also considered to contribute to a narrow worldview susceptible to extremist ideologies. In response, several initiatives were taken by the Government of Pakistan to introduce Madrasa reforms, aiming to modernize the traditional Islamic Madaris in the country. The reforms were launched in 2002 by the government in response to concerns that these institutions were breeding grounds for extremism and terrorism (Candland, 2007).

The main objectives of the Madrasa reforms (aka mainstreaming Madaris) included introducing a standardized curriculum, improving the quality of teaching, and promoting greater transparency and accountability in the management of Madaris (Sajjad, 2013; Hefni & Ahmadi, 2022). To achieve these goals, the government established the 'Madrasa

Education Board' to oversee the registration and accreditation of Madaris across the country (Shafiq et al., 2019). Under the reforms, Madaris were required to teach a core curriculum that included subjects such as English, mathematics, science, and social studies. The government also provided financial incentives to Madaris that complied with the new regulations (Ayub, 2009; Rahman & Bukhari, 2005).

However, such initiatives faced significant criticism from religious authorities, arguing that they aimed to undermine the institutions' objective and Islamic character. As a result, despite the Madrasa reforms in Pakistan, significant results in terms of mainstreaming have not been achieved. Many of these institutions still operate outside the government-regulated system and are disintegrated from the broader education system (see e.g., Bashir & Ul-Haq, 2019; Farooq & Zia, 2018).

A Societal Perspective

While there is limited research on enrolment in Madaris, available data indicate that economic hardship, in addition to an aspiration for religious education, is the main factor driving parents to enrol their children in Madaris (Tahir, 2022; Salahuddin, 2018; Candland, 2005; Hathaway, 2005). Indeed, the increase in enrolment in Madaris despite the marginalization and negative portrayal of these institutions in the aftermath of 9/11, with accusations of promoting extremist views, is a complex issue that raises important questions about the effectiveness of deradicalization strategies and the efficacy of reform in the Madaris education system (Andrabi et al., 2006; Fair, 2012). In particular, the increase in enrolment may suggest that government efforts to counter extremism and radicalization have not successfully addressed or understood the determinants of extremism within the education system.

As mentioned previously, it is indeed conceivable that Madrasa serves as an alternative to mainstream education or a mean for the self to express religious identity in a society that is becoming increasingly secularized.

More importantly, education imbued with religious ideology orchestrates an environment that systematically cultivates and preserves a sense of distinct identity. Therefore, it is worth noting that while Madaris education has been criticized for its quality of curriculum and divisive nature (Ahmed, 2009; Jhingran, 2005), it remains an important source of knowledge/episteme for several families in various parts of the country. However, there is a dearth of factual data comparing the curriculum used at different types of schools, private and public, with that of Madaris in Pakistan (e.g., Malik, 2012).

Scholars have also elucidated that that parents express apprehension regarding children's inadequate religious knowledge when they enrol in modern public or private schools (Ashraf, 2019; Leka, 2023; Khan, 2010). This highlights the significance of providing religious education to children to enhance identity-based outcomes.

While religiosity has been found to correlate with misanthropic behaviors in individuals who attend religious institutions or have a strong religious identity, it is essential to note that such findings must not be generalized for those who verify their self as religious. Factors such as socio-economic status, cultural background, and personal experiences may also significantly shape self attitude(s) towards others. Therefore, a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the relationship between religiosity and misanthropy is necessary.

In view of the above, the marginalization of Madaris may in fact be counterproductive in repelling the appeal of extremist narratives and ideologies (McClure, 2009). In particular, the role of public attitudes towards Madaris is a crucial factor in understanding the foundation of religious institutions. As argued by scholars, an environment marked by substantial public support and aid is necessary for the sustenance of Madris and to ensure continued replenishment of enrollments and finances (Flanigan, 2006), hence, enabling the Madrasa to resist any enforced change or reforms that

may be enacted by an external actor or force (Candland, 2017).

Therefore, gaining broader public support is extremely important for religious elites as it ensures and maintains their social relevance. Bano (2007) also argues that gaining acceptance in wider society is crucial for obtaining the legitimacy of Madaris, given the association of extremism with these institutions. Madaris leverage this support to validate and demonstrate that they are necessary institutions, not only for fostering Islamic values through religious-based education but also for contributing to the socio-cultural fabric of society:

> [The] organizations involved in terror and political insurgency provide charitable social services as a tool to increase support (or reduce resistance) for their activities from members of the community at large. […] Some terrorist organizations use charitable service provision as a tool to shift the position of the local population along a 'continuum of community acceptance' (Flanigan, 2006, p. 642).

A Need for Balanced Approach

It is paramount to differentiate between 'general education' and 'religious education'. General education aims to acquaint future generations with fundamental values, historical events, language, culture, and other fundamental aspects of society. On the other hand, religious education is distinct and exclusive in nature (Jackson, 2004; Sajjad et al., 2017).

One notable drawback of the general education system in Pakistan is that it instills modern (secular) values from a young age, making it challenging for the self to re-orient or redefine its correspondence with religion (Iqbal et al., 2023). This is particularly intricate as exposure to secularized and/or areligeous education may make it more difficult for children to embrace religious education.

Nevertheless, Arabic, the religious language, is taught in many modern or general schools, allowing students to establish a functional relationship (i.e., as definer) with the Quran and Hadith. Religious scholars must also be cognizant of contemporary affairs and proactively engage with the world and evolving knowledge (e.g., Shakil & Akhtar, 2012).

The Missing Element: Knowledge and Morality

Education wields a unique and profound influence on the actions of individuals and society. Moreover, to impart meaning to the self, it is essential for the education system to prioritize the cultivation of moral principles, hence, elevating the self from a state of individualistic preoccupation to one that is socially conscious. In other words, societal socio-psychological, economic, and political outcomes must emanate from a substance of morality, rather than ideology.

The intrinsic capacity of a society to resist fragmentation is contingent upon its ability to overcome the pervasive and divisive us vs. them positioning(s) (Durrani & Dunne, 2010; Walia, 2022). To uphold social cohesion and preserve diversity, it is imperative to undertake a rigorous effort to integrate and synthesize distinct ethno-religious or sectarian identities. The absence of an enabling environment that fosters divisiveness and negates collective solidarity may lead society to a catastrophic trajectory.

While the role of Madaris in Pakistan's education system remains a contentious issue, it is crucial to recognize that the neglect of components is not limited to these institutions alone. Pakistan's general educational system in its current state has equally been criticized for neglecting the central role of morality and epistemology (see e.g., Rehman & Khan, 2011; Ahmed et al., 2014). Consequently, the Pakistan's education system has become fragmented and disordered, with a critical omission of morality and ruptured epistemology (as origin, nature, and scope of knowledge).

Moreover, the tendency to exercise critical thinking and rationalize societal issues s has been impeded, resulting in an education system bereft of critical thinking or creative vitality.

In light of the aforementioned exclusivist education system, it is imperative to scrutinize the implications of such an approach on both individuals and society as a whole. While the argument advocating for the valorization of Madaris as an institution may be weakened by inconsistencies or contradictions in its reasoning or evidence, it is important to recognize that its emphasis on highlighting disagreements among different religious or sectarian identities can potentially lead to the fracturing of a society's social fabric. This can disrupt relationships not only within and between social categories but also among individuals and groups.

The comprehension of relationships as a phenomenon is of utmost importance, as the 'self' is formed by an intricate network of relationships (Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012; Bamberg, 2011). To nurture significant and harmonious relationships with others, the self must effectively engage with other social categories or identities (Ellemers et al., 2002).

Expanding upon the concept that the individual self is composed of a multifaceted network of interdependent relationships, it is imperative to acknowledge the criticality of education that endows import to both self-awareness and self-existence, thereby enabling the cultivation of meaningful and morally grounded relationships with other identities. This process is predicated on the ability to differentiate between right and wrong, and culminates in individuals establishing a relationship with their own being by embodying moral precepts (Damon, 2008).

Here, the term 'moral' or 'morality' pertains to the ethical principles that govern both individuals and society and serves as a universal construct that promotes a shared sense of values and common understanding (Rosen, 2000). In contrast, an 'ideology' exhibits significant variability based on cultural, geographical, and political affiliations and may divide individuals with dissimilar or diverse backgrounds or beliefs (Walsh-Dilley, 2019). The ubiquitous nature of morality as a conceptual framework relative to ideology (divisive) provides a foundation for cohesive societal behavior and a means for transcending differences between individuals and groups. At the heart of morality lies a set of fundamental principles that enjoy widespread acknowledgement as universally desirable virtues, including but not limited to tolerance, inclusivity, compassion, and respect. These principles are the foundation upon which morality is fashioned, and its universality is widely accepted and celebrated.

Therefore, the significance of an education system lies not merely in its ability to shape the intellect and character of its constituents but also in its capacity to effectuate societal cohesion (Reimers, 2006). Neglecting the nurturing of such a system as an integral aspect of nation-building, coupled with its failure to persist over time, may engender a detachment of individuals from moral principles, culminating in a loss of societal moral compass. As a result, the moral foundation of the relationship between the self and society becomes undermined.

Undoubtedly, primary education lays the cornerstone for a child's future academic, social, and moral growth (Berman, 1997; Doan, 2005). Accordingly, scholars have widely propagated that education at this level should prioritize the development of morality over ideology (Alexander, 2005; Ayeni, 2012; Haydon, 2000). By emphasizing moral values, children acquire the essential skills and principles necessary for leading an inclusive life in a diverse society. Conversely, ideologies often reflect the beliefs and values of specific groups or factions, which may contradict those of others. Focusing on a particular desirable ethno-religious, sectarian, or nationalistic ideology in education, which seeks to define the 'other,' could potentially foster division and conflict instead of unity, harmony, and cooperation.

Moreover, morality plays a vital role in promoting critical thinking, empathy, and social responsibility, which are indispensable qualities for the efficient functioning of any society. Through acquiring moral principles and their practical application in various contexts,

children develop critical thinking ability to evaluate information, analyze issues, and make well-informed choices (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009; Colby et al., 2003). Furthermore, morality fosters empathy, which is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others and respect the rights of others (Pala, 2011; Damon, 2008). By nurturing empathy, children are instilled with an appreciation for diversity, conflict resolution skills, and the capacity to collaborate towards common objectives.

The scholarly discourse on the current state of Pakistani society posits that its decadence stems not only from a failure to develop economic theories but also from the lack of integration of knowledge and morality in the education sector. The existing education system has long been criticized for prioritizing knowledge acquisition over morality. This approach creates a perilous division between knowledge and morality, failing to establish a functional relationship with knowledge and comprehend its fundamental essence, potency, and purpose. Knowledge, however, is the quintessential reality of human consciousness, i.e. the driving force behind cognition.

Without a clear understanding of the relationship between knowledge and morality, our education system may inadvertently produce self with expertise (not knowledge per se) but lack the ethical foundation to apply it meaningfully. In order to fully grasp the potential of knowledge and harness its power, we must prioritize developing both intellectual and moral virtues in our educational pursuits. By doing so, we can comprehensive understanding of the purpose and potential of knowledge as a force behind human progress and social cohesion.

Unfortunately, the prevailing discourse surrounding Pakistan's education system explicates a deficiency in prioritizing knowledge and its functional utility (Rehman & Khan, 2011). Addressing these issues holds vital significance as they form consciousness by providing a sustainable and consonant societal structure.

Conclusion

The examination of the Madrasa (as an institution) necessitates a comprehensive and nuanced approach. Furthermore, the role of religion in Pakistani society is complex and calls for careful consideration in balancing the need for a pluralistic and tolerant society with the significance of religious identity. It is imperative that Pakistan's education system strikes a balance between general education and religious education.

While providing a solid foundation of general education is essential for fostering critical thinking and exposing children to different worldviews, religious education must also be taught in a way relevant to the modern world and corresponding with the other epistemic sources. Religious scholars have an integral role in bridging the gap between religious education and modern knowledge, ensuring that students receive an education that prepares them to contribute positively to society.

Furthermore, the focus on morality within education is also of paramount importance. The prioritization of morality can promote critical thinking, empathy, social cohesiveness, and a sense of social responsibility. In contrast, an exclusive focus on religious epistemic (as an authority) may be divisive and ultimately lead to societal fragmentation. Therefore, a multifaceted approach to materalze an integration between Madrasa, religion, and education is essential.

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