

A MADRASA THAT PROMISES BOTH HEAVEN AND EARTH

By Moin Qazi

The South Indian city of Bidar -the northernmost part of Karnataka, 145 km from Hyderabad-is barely known beyond the subcontinent. But In recent years, it has built a great reputation in the field of education. It is drawing students from miles around, and the teaching pedagogy at its largest seminary (madrassa) with its amazing outcomes has baffled educationists. It is not just opening the gateway to modern careers but also strengthening the prospects of eternal salvation.

In a narrow alleyway, opposite the 15th-century edifice of Madrasa of Mahmud Gawan (1472.) in Gole Khana area of Bidar stands Shaheen School, the flagship institution of a vibrant educational revolution whose ripples are touching thousands of lives across the country. Parents seeking a blend of temporal and spiritual education are choosing it over mainstream institutions. It offers a bridge course for Madrasa pass outs and enables them to join the mainstream education system.

Madrasas are an important feature of the Muslim community; they can be, and have been pivotal in engendering tolerance, mutual respect and integration. They are now slowly shaping as beacons of modern learning .Founded on the theory of providing quality education to Urdu-speaking students in their mother tongue, Shaheen is an Urdu medium school that has turned more than 900 students into doctors in the last 15 years.

When Abdul Qadeer, an engineer by profession, started a visionary endeavor a one room tenement accommodating 18 students way back in 1989 he never imagined that his effort would be a harbinger of an educational revolution. With s mission to as to “shape an ideal seat of learning that is accessible to one and all” it has now evolved into a major center of academic excellence touching the lives of more than 11000 students supervised by 400 teachers, all of them engaged in creation of knowledge wealth. The network comprises nine schools, 16 pre-university colleges and a degree college having its clones in several cities.

Muslims desperately need such institutions. they comprise 14% of India’s population but have the highest illiteracy rate (42.7%), the lowest level of enrolment in higher education (4.4%) the lowest share of public (or any formal) jobs, school and university posts including that of government jobs (4.9 %), earn less than other groups, are more excluded from the financial world, and spent fewer years in school – even though. Pitifully Muslims account for 40 per cent of India’s prison population.



Figure 1 Dr Qadeer in his office

Qadeer is one of the many links in the chain of modern liberal Muslim education that was forged by Sir Syed Ahmad who founded the Aligarh Muslim University. Sir Syed found the madrasa syllabus unsuited to the present age and to the spirit of time. He criticized it for encouraging memorizing rather than real understanding.

Secular Muslim educationists also tend to agree that curriculums at most madrasas have become fossilized and it cannot be reformed by cosmetic changes, like tweaking a few courses or installing a few computers. They have to be provided with physical and intellectual resources – and, most important, cultural temperament – to equip their students for the complex demands of a highly competitive modern world?

Madrasas lost their academic and intellectual purity, and ceded prime space to western oriented education. Qadeer has spent his active life bridging the divide between traditional and modern education. His schools teach secular subjects like science, medicine, technology, social sciences, and history, in addition to classical Islamic texts. Having a realistic frame of mind, he tried to inspire Muslim society towards modern education. Historically, madrasas were institutions of higher learning until their importance diminished with the onset of Western education.

Abu Sofyan, a doctor and a product of Shaheen, proudly says he can offer both spiritual and physical healing — *Dawa* and *Dua* (medicine and prayers) to his future patients. The second year MBBS student at Raichur Institute of Medical Sciences is a 'Hafiz',

who has memorized the Qur'an. "When I joined high school, I felt transplanted into an uncongenial soil. With great difficulty I could find my roots. But I managed to score good marks. My stay here turned out to be a life-changer," he says.

'The experiences are not isolated. Hundreds of madrasa graduates are in mainstream colleges now. A youth with a wholesome education is less likely to go wayward. A proper understanding of the modern world and exposure to current knowledge equips youth to withstand wrong influences," Qadeer says. We encountered a lot of skepticism from the Ulema (clergy), but we persisted, and it paid off. Now, they have all come around as they realized we were training boys to achieve the best of both worlds "

More than 300 Shaheen students who cracked the National Eligibility cum Entrance (NEET 2018) have secured admission in different medical colleges of India. Shaheen Group had sent more than 200 students to different medical colleges in 2017, 152 in 2016, 111 in 2015, 93 in 2014, 89 in 2013 and 71 in its first batch in 2012.

One of the 300 eligible students in 2018 is Waheed Abdullah of Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. He is a Hafez-e-Quran and never went to a school. He got free coaching at Shaheen's Bidar center and scored 659 out of the total 720 marks to secure All India Rank (AIR) 95.

Azeem Qureshi's family is another wonderful example. They belong to the butcher (Qureshi) community of Bidar. His three daughters, Ishrat Fatima, Nazia Sultana and Mehreen Fatima are alumni of Shaheen who ended up securing MBBS seats. Ishrat Fatima has done MS in Obstetrics and Gynecology and Nazia Fatima is doing her MD Pathology. Ishrat Fatima was one of the students from this course. A *Hafiza* (a female who memorizes the entire Qur'an verbatim in Arabic), Ishrat moved to Shaheen and eventually went on to complete her medical specialization. She now teaches in a medical college in Jalna district in Maharashtra. "After completing my *Hifz*, I enrolled in Shaheen with the intention of just passing matriculation as it was thought necessary to get married."

On account of Shaheen's resounding success in medical entrance tests, the college has been attracting students from as far as Canada and the Middle East. Non-Muslim students come in large number; Parents value the quality education and appreciate the environment of the Shaheen's campus.

Madrasas and mosques are an important feature of the Muslim community and can reinforce community cohesion and integration. To make them relevant to contemporary times we need a choreographed strategy. People like Qadeer present in Shaheen a model worthy of replication. It is true that more than the model, it is the charisma of inspirational leader's like him that infuse institutions with vibrancy.

Madrasas elsewhere should take a leaf out of Shaheen's book so that they can gear to modern education. The curriculum and pedagogy which most Madrasas follow were designed for a society far different from ours, and therefore these madrasas have lost

their vitality and relevance. Accordingly, madrasas need to introduce subjects that can broaden the minds of students and equip them to understand modern society with all its complexities. This way madrasas can produce able religious leaders and scholars who can comprehend the modern concerns and complex challenges.

Religion, for Sir Muhammad Iqbal the great philosopher poet, was a dynamic and fluid movement; not a closed theology meant for mere imitation. Islam marked the end of prophecy, not human intelligence. Shibli Nu'mani, a renowned twentieth-century scholar from within the madrasa circles has himself noted: "For us Muslims, mere English [modern] education is not sufficient, nor does the old Arabic madrasa education suffice. Our ailment requires a 'compound panacea' (maljun-i murakkab)—one portion eastern and the other western."



Figure 2 The Madrassa at Bidar of the Shaheen Education society

Madrasas, like those run by Qadeer, can play a vital role in promoting an intellect that is well equipped to face challenges of the modern world. Since the students are schooled in classical and modern science as well as secular and religious thought, they are better able to spot scriptural distortions. They also tend to be more connected to their own communities as well as to the mainstream society and their stable sense of identity, religious and otherwise, shield them against radicalism. These madrasas are powerful allies in India's transition to modernity.

Here is what the founders of [Jamia Millia Islamia](#), who were legendary Islamists wrote for its students to sing as the official anthem :

"Here conscience alone is the beacon . . .

It's the Mecca of many faiths,
Travelling is the credo here, pausing a sacrilege, . . .
Cleaving against currents is the creed here,
The pleasure of arrival lies in countering crosscurrents.
This is the home of my yearnings,
This is the land of my dreams.”

While the debate over the modernization of madrasas continues, there are several madrasas in India initiating change to bring them in tune with modern times. Some recent reform efforts have focused on modernizing the teachings on offer at madrasas. This modernization includes the introduction of computer proficiency and English language classes, which strengthen employment potential for students outside of the religious sector. However, the introduction of computer skills at many Deoband-type madrasas is focused only on equipping them with functional literacy and not enabling them to engage with the modern technological revolution.