

Muslim Schooling  
Focusing on Madrasa Schooling  
by Devna Soni

The Sachar Committee Report on the condition of Muslims in India asserts that Muslims are currently the most backward social and religious community of the country. They face relatively low levels of access and quality of education with only 17% of the community holding a matriculation degree.

It is not uncommon for some members of the public to suggest that this backwardness stems from the Muslim community's apparent orthodoxy, rigidity and hostility to modern concepts. Sadly public opinion on this matter is formed without any knowledge of ground realities and is based instead on generalizations and stereotypes. Especially after September 11 2001, Islamic teaching in traditional institutions called '*madrasas*' have become even more politicized and sensitive.

The term madrasa is derived from the Arabic root '*darasa*' which means 'to teach' and the objective of such education is strictly religious – to teach the fundamentals of the faith of Islam and produce *imams* and *muftis*.

Madrasa BhuriBhatiyari on Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, is run by Maulana Nayim – a madrasa graduate. BhuriBhatiyari which is a residential madrasa provides food, boarding and religious education absolutely free of cost and is currently home to 85 children from backward sections of Bihar, most of whom can barely read or write despite the fact that the majority are between 16 to 19 years of age. Maulana Nayim and his co-administrators acknowledge that madrasa graduates are disadvantaged when compared to graduates from mainstream schools in the job market. They suggest that there just are not as many opportunities or jobs as preachers of the faith – the one thing madrasas train children to be. Keeping this in mind BhuriBhatiyari revamped itself and started teaching English, Hindi, Mathematics and basic computer skills albeit with lesser emphasis. This departure from traditional curriculum is a rarity in North India, where literature on the madrasa system suggests that most madrasas still prefer sticking to only religious teachings.

Despite limited opportunities after studying in madrasas, the question remains as to why parents keep sending their children to these institutions? Besides the desire in some parents to teach their children the basics of Islam, economic constraints influence their decision as well. Many children drop out of government schools and join madrasas as they are unable to pay the ancillary expenses related to going to government schools such as stationary, transport, access to bathrooms to bathe in, soap to wash uniforms with. Madrasas on the other hand instead of requiring additional expenditure often operate like orphanages which provide refuge to children. Another reason for parents to opt for madrasas instead of government schools is that most government schools do not have Urdu as a medium of instruction; some have compulsory prayer sessions, insensitive teachers and non-secular textbooks.

While there may be some value in concerns of a growing gap between what is taught in a madrasa and what is required by mainstream society to get employment, madrasa reforms cannot be initiated externally as the changes need to come from within the community for wider acceptance. Instead the government can reform government schooling by providing financial assistance to students for ancillary costs, making the curriculum inclusive by introducing an Urdu medium, sensitizing teachers, ensuring secular textbooks, and prohibiting forced prayer sessions in government schools.