

Participation of religious schools in social and economic development in Pakistan: Obstacles and their possible remedies

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Abstract

The role of religious schools (Madrasas) in Pakistan has long been a subject of debate, especially concerning their contribution to social and economic development. This research explores the participation of Madrasas in the social and economic advancement of Pakistan, identifying key obstacles they face in contributing effectively to these areas. It examines the societal and economic challenges, such as limited curriculum diversification, financial constraints, and negative public perceptions, which hinder the potential of Madrasas in addressing broader developmental goals. Additionally, this study highlights possible remedies to these issues, including curriculum reforms, better integration of Madrasas into the national education system, and improved collaboration with government and non-governmental organizations. The research aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of how Madrasas can be better utilized to contribute positively to the development of Pakistan, focusing on both the challenges and opportunities in overcoming existing barriers.

Keywords: Religious Schools, Madrasas, Social Development, Economic Development, Pakistan, Educational Reform, Curriculum Diversification, Obstacles, Remedies, Government Collaboration

Introduction

Religious schools, or Madrasas, have played a significant role in Pakistan's educational landscape, primarily focusing on religious and moral education. While they have traditionally been viewed as centers for spiritual learning, their potential to contribute to the broader social and economic development of the country has remained underexplored. In recent years, there has been growing interest in understanding how these institutions, which cater to a large section of the population, can actively participate in addressing the country's development challenges. Despite the increasing importance of education in shaping economic and social progress, Madrasas have often been excluded from mainstream discussions on educational reform and national development.

However, Madrasas face several challenges that hinder their effective contribution to the development of Pakistan. These challenges include the narrow focus of their curriculum, which often lacks modern subjects and practical skills that are essential for the workforce. Additionally, there is a lack of financial resources and governmental support to enhance the infrastructure and educational standards of these institutions. Public perceptions of Madrasas, sometimes influenced by political and ideological factors, further complicate their involvement in national development efforts. These barriers limit the ability of Madrasas to provide a well-rounded education that could benefit the broader society.

This study aims to explore the role of Madrasas in Pakistan's social and economic development by identifying the obstacles they face and proposing possible solutions to overcome them. By examining the relationship between Madrasas and development, this research hopes to offer insights into how these institutions can be integrated into the national development framework. Emphasizing curriculum reforms, improved infrastructure, and collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations, the study seeks to provide practical recommendations to enhance the positive impact of Madrasas on Pakistan's socio-economic landscape.

Literature Review

The role of religious schools (Madrasas) in Pakistan's socio-economic development has been a topic of increasing academic and policy interest in recent years. Historically, Madrasas in Pakistan have been primarily focused on religious education, which has limited their contribution to broader educational and developmental goals. However, a growing body of literature suggests that these institutions can play a more substantial role in national development if the challenges they face are addressed.

One of the main challenges discussed in the literature is the narrow focus of Madrasas' curricula. According to Mahmood (2014), Madrasas predominantly offer religious education, with little integration of secular subjects that are crucial for social and economic development. As a result, graduates from these institutions often lack the skills required for employment in the modern economy, which hampers their economic mobility and contributes to socio-

economic stagnation. In contrast, Khan (2016) argues that a balanced curriculum that includes both religious and modern subjects could bridge the gap between the religious and secular sectors of society, contributing to more well-rounded individuals who are better equipped for participation in the workforce and the economy. Several studies have also shown that curriculum reforms in Madrasas can positively influence not only individual development but also societal progress (Jamal, 2018).

Another significant issue highlighted in the literature is the financial and infrastructural challenges faced by Madrasas. Ahmad (2013) notes that most Madrasas operate with limited resources, relying heavily on private donations and charity, which affects the quality of education and physical infrastructure. This lack of funding results in outdated facilities, limited educational materials, and insufficient teacher training, further limiting the impact of Madrasas on socio-economic development. To address these issues, some scholars propose increased government support and partnerships with non-governmental organizations to improve both financial stability and infrastructure (Zahoor, 2019).

Moreover, the perception of Madrasas in Pakistan is often shaped by political and ideological factors, which further complicates their role in national development. According to Ali (2017), Madrasas are sometimes viewed with suspicion, especially due to their perceived association with extremism and radicalism. This stigma negatively impacts their ability to engage in broader societal development efforts. Nevertheless, Ahmed (2020) suggests that if Madrasas can reframe their image by emphasizing their potential for social development and contributing to the community, they may be able to gain greater acceptance within mainstream society.

In conclusion, the literature reflects a growing recognition of the potential for Madrasas to contribute to social and economic development in Pakistan. However, significant challenges such as curriculum limitations, financial constraints, and societal perceptions must be overcome to unlock their full potential. A comprehensive approach that includes curriculum reform, infrastructure development, and changing public perceptions is essential for integrating Madrasas into Pakistan's broader development agenda.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study will be qualitative, employing both primary and secondary data collection techniques. Primary data will be gathered through interviews and surveys with stakeholders, including Madrasa administrators, teachers, students, and government officials, to understand their perspectives on the role of Madrasas in social and economic development. Secondary data will involve a review of relevant academic literature, reports, and policy documents to analyze existing research on the challenges and potential solutions for Madrasas in Pakistan. A comparative analysis will be conducted to examine case studies of Madrasas that have successfully integrated secular education and contributed to community development. The data will be analyzed thematically to identify key obstacles and

propose actionable recommendations for improving the role of Madrasas in national development.

Critical Analysis of the topic

The topic of the participation of Madrasas in Pakistan's social and economic development is multifaceted, encompassing several interrelated challenges and opportunities. These institutions, which have been the cornerstone of religious education for centuries, have historically been insulated from the broader national development framework. While they provide essential educational services to a large section of Pakistan's population, there are significant limitations in their ability to contribute meaningfully to socio-economic progress. This critical analysis will explore the opportunities and constraints surrounding the role of Madrasas in Pakistan's development, critically engaging with the existing literature on curriculum, funding, infrastructure, public perception, and potential reforms.

One of the most pressing issues facing Madrasas is their narrow curriculum, primarily focused on religious studies, which limits their graduates' ability to engage in the modern economy. Scholars such as Mahmood (2014) and Khan (2016) have critiqued this approach, pointing out that a lack of exposure to secular subjects like mathematics, science, and social studies confines the students' potential for upward mobility. This limitation stems from a historical separation between religious and secular education systems in Pakistan, where Madrasas are predominantly seen as institutions for preserving religious knowledge, rather than contributing to economic productivity. While this specialization in religious studies has its value, the failure to incorporate modern subjects has made Madrasas less relevant to the socio-economic needs of the country. Madrasas, therefore, need to adapt their curriculum to include practical, marketable skills, such as vocational training, that would empower students to contribute to the modern workforce.

Despite these criticisms, the potential for Madrasas to contribute to Pakistan's development cannot be ignored. Jamal (2018) emphasizes that curriculum reform in Madrasas is not just about adding secular subjects, but also about fostering critical thinking and the development of well-rounded individuals who can make meaningful contributions to society. This perspective is particularly important, as the inclusion of secular subjects does not necessarily mean the erosion of religious values. On the contrary, it could allow for a more holistic approach to education where both religious and secular knowledge coexist, preparing students to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing world. This argument resonates with the broader educational reform movements globally, where an interdisciplinary approach to education is increasingly being valued for its ability to produce more versatile and adaptable citizens.

Another major obstacle to the participation of Madrasas in social and economic development is their financial instability. According to Ahmad (2013), most Madrasas in Pakistan rely heavily on donations and charitable funding, which makes them vulnerable to fluctuations in financial support. This dependency undermines their ability to invest in modern educational tools,

infrastructure, and teacher training. The reliance on informal and often inconsistent financial sources results in poor quality of education, limited access to technological resources, and a lack of professional development opportunities for educators. Zahoor (2019) calls for greater involvement of the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide financial and infrastructural support to Madrasas. However, while such partnerships could significantly improve the financial and operational stability of these institutions, they also raise concerns about the secularization of religious institutions. The challenge lies in finding a balance between providing financial support and ensuring that Madrasas retain their religious autonomy.

In light of these financial constraints, some scholars advocate for a more innovative approach to funding Madrasas, such as public-private partnerships or collaborations with international organizations. Zahoor (2019) suggests that by involving NGOs in the infrastructural development of Madrasas, these institutions could gain access to a broader range of resources and expertise. This would allow Madrasas to enhance their educational offerings and expand their role in national development. However, such collaborations must be approached carefully to avoid any perception of foreign or secular influence compromising the religious character of these institutions. Therefore, any financial reforms should be implemented with the understanding that Madrasas must maintain their core values while simultaneously embracing modern educational practices.

The societal perception of Madrasas is another critical factor influencing their role in national development. As Ali (2017) points out, Madrasas are often viewed with suspicion by the wider public, due in part to their perceived links to extremism and radicalization. This negative image has made it difficult for Madrasas to gain acceptance as legitimate educational institutions that can contribute to social and economic progress. This perception is particularly damaging, as it leads to exclusion from mainstream educational and development initiatives. Many Madrasas have been marginalized in the policy-making process, and their potential contributions to national development are often overlooked or undervalued.

The issue of public perception is further complicated by the political and ideological landscape of Pakistan. The association of Madrasas with extremism, particularly following the events of the 1980s and 1990s, has created a lasting stigma. However, it is essential to distinguish between the actions of a minority of Madrasas and the majority that focus on providing basic religious education. Ahmed (2020) suggests that Madrasas must actively work to reframe their image by emphasizing their social contributions, such as community welfare programs and charitable initiatives. This approach could help improve public perceptions and open up opportunities for greater collaboration with other sectors of society. For instance, many Madrasas already provide social services such as healthcare, orphanages, and food distribution, which could be highlighted to demonstrate their broader social responsibility.

Furthermore, while Madrasas face challenges in terms of public perception, they also have the potential to play a key role in promoting social cohesion. Ahmed (2020) argues that Madrasas,

particularly those that focus on tolerance, respect for diversity, and interfaith dialogue, can contribute to reducing sectarian violence and fostering social harmony. Given Pakistan's diverse religious and ethnic composition, Madrasas that promote peace and unity could become powerful instruments for social development. Their role in reducing sectarianism could be seen as a vital contribution to Pakistan's socio-political stability, which is essential for economic growth and national development.

Teacher training is another crucial aspect that affects the role of Madrasas in Pakistan's development. Many Madrasa teachers lack formal training in modern pedagogical methods, which undermines the quality of education provided. According to Khan (2016), this issue is particularly pronounced in Madrasas that aim to teach secular subjects alongside religious studies. Without proper training in teaching methodologies, educators struggle to effectively impart knowledge, especially in complex subjects such as mathematics and science. This gap in teacher training further limits the capacity of Madrasas to contribute to the social and economic development of the country. Jamal (2018) stresses the need for targeted teacher training programs that focus not only on religious pedagogy but also on modern educational techniques. The development of such programs could help elevate the teaching standards in Madrasas and improve the quality of education provided.

The integration of Madrasas into the broader national educational framework is also a key factor in determining their effectiveness in social and economic development. Mahmood (2014) argues that one of the significant obstacles to the development of Madrasas is their marginalization from mainstream educational policies and reforms. This exclusion from national development strategies has led to a fragmented education system, where religious and secular educational streams remain disconnected. The government's failure to integrate Madrasas into national education policy has hindered their ability to fully contribute to social and economic progress. However, there is a growing recognition that a more inclusive approach to education, which integrates Madrasas into the broader educational framework, could enhance their role in national development. Mahmood (2014) suggests that government involvement in curriculum reform, teacher training, and infrastructural development could improve the quality of education in Madrasas and enable them to contribute more effectively to national development.

In conclusion, while Madrasas in Pakistan face several challenges, including limited curricula, financial constraints, negative public perception, and teacher training deficits, they also have significant potential to contribute to the country's social and economic development. The integration of secular subjects into the curriculum, improved teacher training, and increased financial support are key factors that could help unlock this potential. Moreover, a positive rebranding of Madrasas, emphasizing their social contributions, could help shift public perception and foster greater collaboration with other sectors of society. By addressing these challenges and embracing modern educational practices, Madrasas could play a pivotal role in Pakistan's development, contributing to both social cohesion and economic progress.

Curriculum Reforms and Integration of Secular Education in Madrasas

The topic of curriculum reforms and the integration of secular education into Madrasas in Pakistan is a critical area of discussion when it comes to the contribution of religious schools to the country's social and economic development. Historically, Madrasas in Pakistan have focused on religious education, offering an in-depth study of the Quran, Hadith, Fiqh, and other Islamic sciences. However, with the increasing demands of the modern world and the need for vocational and academic skills, there has been growing discourse around the necessity of incorporating secular subjects, such as mathematics, science, and social studies, into the Madrasa curriculum. While this integration could enhance the employability of Madrasa graduates and better prepare them for participation in the global economy, it also raises several challenges regarding the preservation of religious identity and the broader role of Madrasas in society.

One of the primary arguments in favor of curriculum reforms is the increasing irrelevance of a strictly religious curriculum in the face of global socio-economic changes. Scholars such as Mahmood (2014) and Khan (2016) argue that the narrow, traditional curriculum offered by many Madrasas restricts the intellectual and economic potential of students, who may find it difficult to compete in the modern workforce. Without a solid grounding in secular subjects, Madrasa graduates often struggle to secure employment outside of religious contexts, contributing to high levels of underemployment and unemployment among this segment of the population. As Pakistan strives to modernize and compete in a globalized economy, the integration of secular education into Madrasa systems is viewed as an essential step in producing a more skilled, versatile workforce that can contribute meaningfully to national development.

However, this call for curriculum reforms is not without its criticisms. There are significant concerns about the potential for secularization to erode the religious identity of Madrasas, which have historically been seen as institutions for preserving Islamic knowledge and values. Many traditionalists and conservative religious scholars argue that the inclusion of secular subjects would undermine the core religious mission of Madrasas and lead to their secularization, diluting the very purpose for which they were established. Ahmad (2013) discusses how the secular education system in Pakistan is often viewed with suspicion by religious communities, who fear that the introduction of secular subjects could lead to a loss of spiritual values and Islamic ethics. Moreover, some critics contend that the state's efforts to reform the Madrasa curriculum could be motivated by an agenda to weaken religious institutions and impose a Westernized worldview.

In addition to concerns about secularization, there are also practical challenges in implementing curriculum reforms in Madrasas. The lack of trained teachers capable of effectively teaching secular subjects is one of the foremost barriers to change. Madrasas in Pakistan often operate with minimal resources, and many teachers have limited formal training in modern pedagogy or secular disciplines. This lack of training is further exacerbated by the absence of a standardized

teaching framework that integrates religious and secular knowledge. According to Jamal (2018), a comprehensive teacher training program is essential for the successful integration of secular education in Madrasas. Without such programs, teachers may not be equipped to effectively teach complex subjects like science and mathematics, which require a more systematic and structured approach than is typical in religious education. Additionally, the lack of resources and infrastructure—such as classrooms equipped with modern teaching tools, technology, and educational materials—poses a significant obstacle to the implementation of such reforms.

On the other hand, proponents of reform argue that the inclusion of secular subjects does not necessarily equate to the erosion of religious values. Jamal (2018) highlights the possibility of creating a balanced curriculum that combines Islamic teachings with practical skills and secular knowledge. Such a curriculum could prepare students to engage in both religious and secular spheres of life, enabling them to contribute to society in a more holistic way. The integration of subjects such as economics, history, and environmental science could help Madrasa graduates develop critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of the world around them, fostering social cohesion and promoting active citizenship. Additionally, the incorporation of vocational and technical training could empower students to pursue careers in fields like engineering, healthcare, and information technology, which are essential to Pakistan's economic development.

While some Madrasas have made efforts to modernize their curricula, the pace of reform has been slow and uneven. According to Zahoor (2019), the challenge lies not only in modifying the curriculum but also in securing the buy-in of the religious leadership that governs Madrasas. Many clerics view secular education as a tool of cultural imperialism, designed to diminish the influence of Islamic teachings. This resistance has led to a fragmented approach to curriculum reform, where only a small number of Madrasas have embraced the idea of integrating secular education, while the majority remain firmly entrenched in their traditional educational models. The state, which has the resources and the mandate to facilitate such reforms, has not always been successful in engaging religious institutions in a meaningful dialogue about educational change.

Moreover, Zahoor (2019) notes that the integration of secular subjects is often seen as a compromise, and some Madrasas may simply add secular courses to their curriculum without genuinely integrating them into the educational process. For instance, students may be taught secular subjects in isolation, without contextualizing them within an Islamic framework, which diminishes the effectiveness of such reforms. This piecemeal approach is unlikely to produce the kind of holistic education needed to prepare Madrasa students for the demands of the modern world. A more comprehensive approach is necessary, one that takes into account the challenges of balancing religious teachings with secular knowledge while maintaining the integrity of both.

Furthermore, the political landscape surrounding Madrasa reforms complicates the issue. The Pakistani government has often been hesitant to engage with Madrasas due to concerns over political backlash, particularly from conservative religious groups. The government's failure to implement significant reforms has resulted in a continued divide between the formal and informal education sectors, with Madrasas remaining largely outside the purview of national educational policies. Mahmood (2014) argues that the lack of a clear and unified strategy to reform the Madrasa system has led to a missed opportunity in improving the quality of education in Pakistan. Given the size and influence of Madrasas, especially in rural areas, a more inclusive educational reform strategy that integrates these institutions into national development policies would have significant social and economic benefits.

In conclusion, the integration of secular education into Madrasas presents both opportunities and challenges. While it is clear that curriculum reforms are necessary to enhance the employability and socio-economic mobility of Madrasa graduates, the concerns about secularization, financial constraints, and resistance from traditionalist religious groups cannot be overlooked. The successful integration of secular subjects into Madrasas will require a careful and nuanced approach, which respects religious traditions while also embracing the practical needs of the modern world. By focusing on teacher training, infrastructure development, and the creation of a balanced curriculum, Pakistan could harness the full potential of its Madrasa system and contribute to its national development.

Financial Sustainability and Government Support for Madrasas

The issue of financial sustainability in Madrasas is a critical concern in Pakistan, as these institutions often rely heavily on charitable donations, both from local and international sources, to fund their operations. This reliance on external funding can lead to financial instability, making it difficult for Madrasas to maintain quality education and infrastructure. A significant challenge arises from the fact that Madrasas, especially those in rural and underserved areas, typically lack the financial resources to implement modern educational tools or improve their teaching staff. Scholars such as Mahmood (2014) have highlighted that the lack of financial autonomy in these institutions limits their ability to evolve and modernize, ultimately hindering their role in contributing to Pakistan's social and economic development.

Government support is often seen as a potential remedy for this financial instability. However, the Pakistani government's role in funding Madrasas has been minimal and inconsistent. Some studies suggest that government intervention could help Madrasas enhance their educational offerings and contribute more effectively to the national development agenda (Jamal 2018). By providing financial support for infrastructure development, teacher training programs, and curriculum integration, the government could significantly improve the quality of education in Madrasas. However, there are concerns about the effectiveness and fairness of government interventions, given the political sensitivities surrounding the role of religious institutions in Pakistan. Government funding could be perceived as an attempt to control or secularize

religious institutions, which would lead to resistance from conservative elements within society and within the Madrasas themselves.

The limited government support also underscores the broader issue of the state's reluctance to regulate and integrate Madrasas into the formal education system. The financial challenges faced by Madrasas are compounded by the lack of a structured policy framework that would offer long-term financial sustainability. As noted by Zahoor (2019), without a coherent policy, the relationship between Madrasas and the government remains fraught with challenges, particularly when it comes to aligning Madrasas' educational goals with national priorities. Madrasas that seek to diversify their income sources, such as through offering vocational training or secular subjects, often face bureaucratic hurdles and lack access to state resources that could enable them to offer a well-rounded education.

Moreover, the privatized nature of Madrasas funding also gives rise to concerns regarding transparency and accountability. Many Madrasas rely on private donations, some of which come from international sources, which could be subject to political or ideological influences. While this funding model helps keep Madrasas independent, it also risks making them susceptible to external pressures and manipulation. The need for clearer oversight and more transparent management of financial resources is critical in ensuring that Madrasas are not disproportionately influenced by foreign donors with political agendas. Addressing the financial sustainability of Madrasas requires not just government funding, but also the establishment of financial governance systems that ensure accountability, fairness, and independence from political and external pressures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while Madrasas in Pakistan play a crucial role in providing religious education and social services, their financial sustainability remains a significant challenge. The reliance on charitable donations and external funding creates instability, hindering their ability to modernize and contribute effectively to national development. Although government support could enhance the infrastructure, curriculum, and educational quality in these institutions, the limited and inconsistent financial assistance has compounded the issue. To ensure long-term sustainability, a comprehensive and transparent policy framework is needed, one that facilitates financial support while balancing religious autonomy and national educational objectives. Only through collaboration between the government, non-governmental organizations, and the Madrasas themselves can the financial stability and educational impact of these institutions be achieved.

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