

The case against kawmi madrasas

AZFAR AZIZ

HOW much longer will it take for our policy-makers to wake up to the reality that the so-called old-scheme -- "kawmi" -- madrasas are as anti-people and anti-social in nature as anti-Islamic in spirit?

May be the governments since 1971 have all along been aware of their reactionary nature but none of them could muster enough moral and political courage or had enough integrity to ban them.

But the recent proofs that many of these Kawmi madrasas are hotbeds of al-Qaeda-type, and probably al-Qaeda-linked, "Islamist" militancy gives utmost urgency to abolishing these breeding places of many social, political, economic, security, and religious evils.

Economically, kawmi madrasas are an unwelcome burden on the society as they produce a class of citizens who have no productive skill. The only work they usually do is that of an imam or a muezzin of a

mosque, besides presiding over milad mahfils, all in exchange of money. These institutions, often occupying public land and consuming power and water without paying the bills, also run on social charity.

A poor economy like Bangladesh can ill-afford such schools that pay it back with nothing but numerous bigots and clergymen, who have no place in an Islamic society as perceived by its founder, Prophet Mohammed. It is in this aspect that kawmi madrasas go against the spirit of Islam. In Mohammed's lifetime and for many years after his death, Islam did not allow priesthood as a profession as it also discouraged monasticism.

In Islam, every Muslim prays, observes other rituals and carries out other religious duties for the sake of Allah alone and in exchange for no earthly gains which tantamount to Shirk or acknowledging something/somebody else as partner to His absolute monopoly on worship. But, as in the case of every other religion, Islamic

norms started to degenerate soon after the death of the Prophet. For example, the second Khaliph, Omar Ibn Khattab, prohibited women from taking part in mass prayers, Jamaats, which had been a customary practice during Mohammed's lifetime, on the pretext that the changed social circumstances no more permitted that tradition to continue.

The circumstances changed indeed, and continued to change more and more, and, at onestage, priesthood, though much abhorred by the Prophet who held it as one of the major cause for the degeneration of Christianity, crept into Islam. The original practice was to elect/select the most knowledgeable, honourable and old person among the people gathered to pray to lead the congregation, and, of course, in exchange for nothing. By Islamic tenets, every Muslim is also bound to earn his/her bread by working, whether as a manual labourer, a farmer, an artisan, a professional, a trader, or a miller. It is because Islam did not want any of its

followers to remain unproductive and thus not contributing to the common social good. That is why it discouraged also Rahbaniat or monasticism, another trait of many older religions.

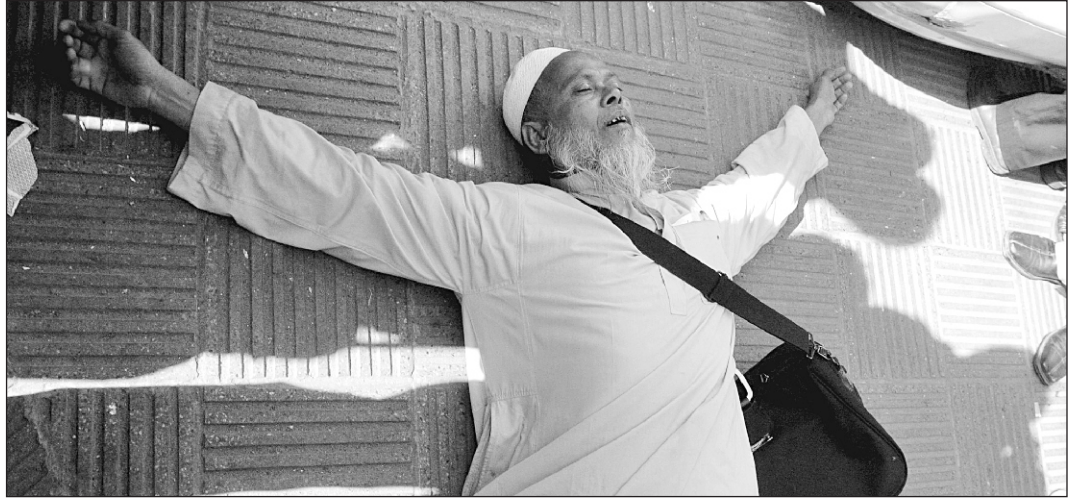
So, from the point of view of both economics and religion, the unproductive clerical and parasitic life the products of the parasitic Kawmi madrasas live should not be permitted to continue as they are as much contrary to the essence, spirit and norms of the religion they sell unashamedly to the ignorant masses to earn a living as they are to the economic well-being of the nation, especially of the vast majority of its poor people. The money wasted on these so-called educational institutes and their ill-educated graduates could be better utilised for ensuring healthcare and food security of the poor and the disadvantaged.

Along with the students and graduates, the authorities of these kawmi madrasas and the quarters that have political, financial or other vested inter-

ests in them comprise a section of the society who, in keeping with its fanatic and reactionary tradition as was seen during the Liberation War, in recent times has emerged as the main population bank from which the Islamist militants draw their operatives to carry out the most atrocious acts like bombing innocent people to death in an attempt what it claims to establish an Islamic state.

Although the situation in Bangladesh is far different than that in Afghanistan or Iraq, these quasi-Islamist bigots have their own hidden political agenda under the anti-US stance and love for Laden and the late Saddam they preach. They use the kawmi madrasas as their strongholds and ruthlessly use the graduates, students and supporters of these institutions to realise their political ambitions.

Recent intelligence reports show that last year's crackdown on the banned JMB has not succeeded in stopping their anti-state and anti-social schemes which have taken new channels,



and they have become more alert and cautious and are preparing to pounce upon the nation once again at any opportune time.

Against this background, the people still having a sane mind feel the government should abolish these vice dens called kawmi madrasas, a number of which in Bagmara, Rajshahi had even been used as torture chambers of medieval cruelty, and thus deprive these regrouping

militants of their safe havens and recruit banks and, at the same time, deliver the poor nation of an unwanted, and unwarranted, burden.

For those who want to study Islamic theology there are plenty of institutions under the Madrasa Education Board which also offer their graduates opportunities to enrol in university or technical courses to acquire some professional skills and thereby become productive and

worthy members of the society.

I should reiterate again -- it is high time, may be the last one, to take a bold strategic decision on this issue of utmost national interest, however tough and daring it may seem to be, because the consequence of not doing that may prove disastrous by many more degrees, recovering from which may even be impossible.

Trouble ahead?

MD. IQBAL CHOWDHURY

OCTOBER 28, 2006 to JANUARY 10, 2007, everyday was a nightmare for the people. On January 11 the public felt relieved with the hope that they will be able to move around hand in hand with family members/friends. Life will be easy. Syndicates will be finished; prices will come down to the land. Economy will be booming. Everybody will be in merry mood.

But what are we experiencing now? Prices of essential commodities have been increased by more than 30% from the level they were at the time of BNP leaving power. It was unbearable at that time. How shall we now explain, what word can supersede unbearable? Price of coarse rice was Tk 18 per kg now it is Tk 22. Price of 5 ltr soybean oil was Tk 230, now it is Tk 330. Potato was Tk 14 per kg now it is Tk 18-20 per kg.

The person who needed Tk 3,000 per month before October 28, 2006, now needs Tk 3,900 to meet his expenditure. Reality is, the income of day labourers has been reduced significantly. Prior to emergency he would almost work 30 days a month (if we do not consider strike). Now he is getting work for 15 days at best in a month. If per day income is Tk 120 now, he is getting Tk 1,800 per month. He needs Tk 3,900 per month. He has to take loan of Tk 2,100 per month to maintain his living standard.

It means the day labourers have been suffering from severe decline in exchange entitlement, i.e. they are losing their purchasing power. He is taking loan from friends or relatives as far as possible. How long he will live on loan? Maybe he will go to NGOs. It will be another pain to repay weekly installment. Frustration of this labour class will reach to a level, which the

government will not be able to contain.

More and more people from rural Bangladesh are joining the 100 or more labour spots in the city these days. And most of these hard working people are unaware of their rights. If the government fails to contain this inflow of labour forces from rural Bangladesh, the situation will become worse.

There was famine in the year 1943, The Great Bengal Famine. The reason was not the shortage of food in Bengal. The reason was that there was no work for agriculture labourers and those who had work, drastically reduced their exchange entitlement.

The index of exchange rate between agricultural labourers and food grains stood at 34 during the first half of 1943-44 whereas it was 101 in 1940-41. They were coming to Calcutta in groups for jobs. The famine took about 1.5 million lives

officially and unofficially three to four million.

Amartya Sen in his book Poverty and Famine concluded: "The disastrous Bengal famine was not the reflection of a remarkable over-all shortage of food grains in Bengal. A dramatic decline in the exchange rate against labour emerged. It is quite clear that agricultural labour did not share in the inflationary rise enjoyed by many other sections of the community in the war economy of Bengal. The Food Availability Decline (FAD) approach provided no warning of the development of gigantic famine arising from shifting exchange entitlements."

There was fall in employment compared with the normal pattern. The distress of the rural population, especially of agricultural labour, arising from shifting exchanger entitlements had already been quite substantial.

In the famine period, the worst affected groups seem to have been fishermen, transport workers, paddy huskers, agricultural labourers, those in "other productive occupations," craftsmen and non-agricultural labourers, in that order.

Causes of sharp movement of exchange entitlement in 1943: The price rise to a great extent, a result of general inflationary pressure in a war economy. We are also experiencing to some extent same inflationary pressure for emergency economy.

Second, the demand forces were reinforced by the indifferent winter crop and by vigorous speculation and panic hoardings. We do not fall under these criteria.

Third, speculative withdrawal and panic purchase of rice stocks was encouraged by administrative chaos, especially the inept handling of three procurement schemes,

tried and hurriedly abandoned between December and March, ending with the sudden abolition of price control in the wholesale market on March 11. Presently the government is unable to control the prices.

Fourth, the prohibition of import/export of cereals in general and of rice in particular from each province, which had come into operation during 1942. In our case, import L/C opening drastically dropped because of fear.

Fifth, an important aspect of the famine was its association with an uneven expansion in incomes and purchasing powers. This situation is prevailing in Bangladesh.

The abundance of labour in the agricultural sector made the economic position of the labourers in the agricultural sector weak. Abundance of labour in agricultural sector is still prevailing.

Sixth, as distress developed generally in the rural economy of Bengal, the demand for the luxury goods declined sharply -- a phenomenon that has been observed in other famines as well. This helped to plunge additional groups of people into destitution. At present there is a trend in reducing demand for luxury goods.

Finally, it is perhaps significant that the Bengal famine stood exactly at the borderline of two historical price regimes. Prices had been more or less stationary for decades (the 1941 rice price was comparable to that in 1914), and the price rises (especially of food) that started off in 1942 were to become a part of life from then on. Institutional arrangements, including wage systems, were slow to adjust to the new reality.

We have now entered into a historical transitional period of post-MFA. As an LDC we shall

be severely affected because of resource constraints.

To address this situation Amartya Sen suggested: "Since no matter how a famine is caused, methods of breaking it call for a large supply of food in the public distribution system. This applies not only organizing rationing and control, but also to undertaking work programmes and other methods of increasing purchasing power for those hit by shifts in exchange entitlements in a general inflationary situation."

If we take the index of exchange rate between unskilled labourer and food grains in October 2006 was 100, now it is about 50. If it comes down to 30 then the government will have no time to combat the disaster. Right now is the time to take adequate measures to halt the fall of exchange entitlement of the lower earning groups.

Suicide offensive

SAMI YOUSAFZAI AND RON MOREAU

THE village was in Taliban country southwest of Kabul. The visit had been arranged through reliable Taliban sources. Our aim was to speak to volunteers who had trained to become suicide bombers; we hoped to shed light on an increasingly deadly feature of the war in Afghanistan.

At a mud-brick house, a guerrilla showed us a sack he said contained a pair of suicide vests: "If these jackets go off, anyone within 100 meters will be killed," he warned. As it happened, the bombs killed no one that day. But Taliban leaders are counting on these weapons to drive America out of Afghanistan.

Once virtually unknown here,

suicide bombings are becoming an ever more common tactic. In his latest propaganda video, the Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah Akhund brags of having 1,800 bombers at the ready. Others question that figure, but the rate of suicide attacks has jumped: there were 139 last year -- more than five times the 2005 number -- and 35 so far this year.

In early April, suicide car bombs in Laghman province and Kabul reportedly killed 14. And mounting evidence confirms what was once only suspected: that some bombers are being trained by Iraqi insurgents.

Dadullah, in another video filmed in late February, tells a crowd of 450 or so bomber recruits, "Your bodies are our new cruise missiles and atomic bombs." It's a

misleading analogy, since suicide vests aren't nearly that powerful. But they don't have to be: they still kill, and have a disproportionate impact on the struggle for hearts and minds.

As in Iraq, suicide bombers in Afghanistan have driven a wedge between ordinary people and the government. Many civilians now avoid police and soldiers for fear of suicide attacks. Western troops have grown similarly nervous.

Coalition vehicles now display warning signs in both Pashto and Dari: keep back or we'll shoot. In recent months, at least 10 Afghan civilians have died when they got too close. With collateral damage rising, "Afghans (now) see US convoys as a sign of trouble and terror," says parliamentarian Abdul Sattar Khowasi.

Suicide attacks were once unthinkable here, where they were viewed as a terrible crime against Islam. But the Taliban have come up with ways to rationalize them and al-Qaeda has begun importing tactics and training from the Middle East. According to Taliban commanders, the process began in mid-2003, just months after the US invasion of Iraq.

Osama bin Laden sent one of his most senior operations men, a former Iraqi Army officer named Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi (now in US custody in Guantánamo Bay), to strike a deal with the notorious terrorist Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. In return for bin Laden's blessing and financial support, Zarqawi and other insurgents agreed to start training the Taliban in the new tools of their trade.

In early 2005, the Taliban began sending scores of fighters to Iraq, where they learned how to use deadly "shaped" IEDs and to recruit, train and deploy suicide bombers. The Afghan fighters then returned home and passed on the deadly information to their commanders, and Zarqawi began sending to Afghanistan small teams of skilled Arab insurgents.

By early 2006, the Taliban had learned it couldn't fight Coalition forces toe to toe so began deploying suicide bombers in force. The Pentagon began to speak of the "iraqification" of the Afghan conflict. Taliban and Qaeda recruiters started prowling the region tirelessly in search of poor, uneducated young prospects willing to accept their promises of an instant trip to paradise -- along with pay-

offs of thousands of dollars to the bombers' families, according to US intelligence.

That's how the insurgents we met got involved. Our guide introduced us to three young, intense-looking fedayeen -- literally, men ready to sacrifice their lives. "Abu Aqeel," a 27-year-old from Peshawar, told us his story, which US intelligence says is fairly typical.

His upbringing hadn't been especially religious; he'd attended a government school, not a madrasa. But when the United States attacked Afghanistan in 2001 he decided to join the Taliban, eventually training at a militant boot camp in South Waziristan and then entering Afghanistan by foot (his equipment was sent in separately).

Then he waited. Planning an attack isn't simple, says Mullah Sabir, a senior Taliban commander. The heavy armor and sophisticated detection systems and countermeasures used by Coalition vehicles make them tricky targets, so suicide bombers are often sent out against Afghan officials or police instead.

This increases the risk to civilians, who account for most of the victims. But that's no great worry for the Taliban, since many Afghans now blame the Americans for any civilian deaths. After one March attack just outside Jalalabad, where US soldiers were ambushed and returned fire indiscriminately, 12 civilians were killed and 35 wounded, leading hundreds of furious townspeople to march in a violent anti-US demonstration.

Taliban sources say the three recruits our reporter met have thus far failed to carry out fatal attacks. In fact, the bombers often succeed only in killing themselves. Nevertheless, the insurgents aren't ready to give up the tactic.

As Mullah Sabir says, "Fighting a US armored vehicle with an AK-47 is not much different" from putting on an explosive vest. "Either way you'll be killed." But the attacks are leading many Afghans to question the Coalition's ability to protect them. That spells more trouble to come: if locals give up on the international efforts, they will start looking elsewhere for security -- even if it means cooperating with the Taliban.

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Living with the Master

RAFI HOSSAIN

WHEN Rajiv Kaswani pushed his way through the crowd to take me to Guruji, he asked me "Kaha the tum? (Where were you?)" I told him that I was here all along waiting for him to call me.

He said, "That I know. But where have you come from after all these years?" Later he added, "Good, my precious. But let's make sure you never get lost again. Stay here, stay where you belong." At that point Rajiv Kaswani told Guruji that I had actually come from Bangladesh to partake in the advanced course. Guruji looked at me and said, "Of course, he will have to learn everything. He will become a teacher." He was in a bit of a hurry, so he gave me his blessings and went to his way to his next commitment, the Bharat Muni arrangements. He told me that I should go to Rishikesh for the

advanced course and I should meet up with him.

I was a little stunned. This was my first encounter with him but he had acted as if he already knew me. Why did he say that I had gotten lost? Why did he say I should not get lost again? Was he addressing me, or had he confused me with someone else? I fell into a dilemma as to what I should do. At the same time, I felt his strong presence; there was an indescribable power in his gaze.

Earlier when I had gone to the "Art of Living" course (a six-day breathing course, followed by yoga, meditation and asanas, it benefits one's health as well as help keep physically and mentally calm and focused), the teacher told me that I would become the first instructor in Bangladesh.

Once again I was confused, just as I had been when I first met Guruji. I had gone to take the course, why was he saying I would

be a teacher one day? I wondered to myself where this road would take me. Do I really know the way? Is this really for me? Innumerable questions like that were crowding in my mind, making me intensely doubtful. Nevertheless, I went to Rishikesh with all these doubts and took the course.

The course was a great experience. Rishikesh is an idyllic setting, and is the perfect setting for saints, for anyone who wants to meditate, or for elders. I enjoyed myself very much there. One day, Guruji called me into his kutir and I went to meet him there. That was a turbulent period of my life and was generally feeling very low. I wanted to share my thoughts with him. But once I went there, I saw that the room was full of people, but I wanted to speak to him on my own without so many people overhearing. As if he sensed that, Guruji asked everyone to leave so he could speak to me in private. When I started talking

about my own story, at one point he continued, telling me my own story. At times I was speechless, he was telling my story. And then at times he would stop and ask me to continue. He told me that I should not feel helpless, bad times were a part of life. Day follows night and so on. He told me, "I am always with you." He did not really give me any solutions, nor any medicine or any blessed potions. I simply returned home with his blessings and I was transformed.

Why do we call him a Guru? Who is a Guru? Guru means master, one who teaches you, shows you the way. For people like us, it is a blessing to be under a living master because whenever we have problems we can consult with the Guru and receive guidelines on any matter. Since birth, an individual has many masters. Parents, helpers, teachers all come into our lives as masters. Whether or not we use the word Guru to address them,

they are gurus to us.

We should always feel gratitude towards the masters, not in a material sense, but we should carry them in our hearts. This will help with our material and spiritual growth. The Guru can be of any age and of any social position. One must totally surrender to the Guru to find the way. One should never compare one's Guru to others. A Guru should not be seen as superior or inferior to anyone else. A disciple should never criticize or find fault in a Guru, the disciple must only learn from the Guru. A true Guru will always be there for his disciple, even when he loses his way. When a disciple does something wrong, the Guru shows him the right way, but he does not punish. Once I went to a place that I should not have, through intense self-doubt. I was having a serious battle of conscience. But once I went there, I saw another disciple there and he reminded me that I

should not be there. I immediately realized my mistake and turned back. The lesson here is the Guruji will always take care of you.

Now, whenever I am about to do something, good or bad, I have to consider the fact that Guruji is watching. He will know what I am doing so I have to be careful. Through this process of understanding one's own mistakes and then rebuilding oneself, one can achieve the desired path. For this reason, every person needs a Guru in his or her life.

Everybody stumbles, everybody suffers from confusion and doubt. We all need guidance. Though I am always thinking that he is doing so much for me, how much have I been able to give in return? So on his 51st birthday, I am happy that I have been blessed with his presence. I hope I find the strength to understand right and wrong, and I hope I am able to contribute to my society and country in the right



way. I know that wherever I am in this world, my master, my Guru is always with me. I love you, Guruji.

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