

## INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM: A CASE OF MADRASSAHS IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the debate between the uniformity and diversity of schooling models, by using two theoretical perspectives i.e., world cultural theory and its anthropological critique. The former theoretical framework argues for a global convergence in education systems, while the latter emphasizes local variations in schooling practices based on the local contexts. The paper uses the case of religious schools in Pakistan to highlight the strengths and limitations of both perspectives. Divided into three parts, the paper first examines neo-institutionalism, or world culture theory, then discusses contemporary trends in madrasahs, and finally synthesizes the two perspectives by analyzing the madrasah system within this theoretical framework.*

### INTRODUCTION

Is there one universal model of schooling or many? Are schools becoming similar over time or different? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions from two diverging viewpoints – world cultural theory and its anthropological critique. The former espouses the one global model of schooling while the latter highlights the different forms of schooling and variations within different school systems. To have better understanding of both positions, I will use the example of religious schools in Pakistan, known as Madrassah, to highlight the strengths and limitations of both positions. The paper consists of three parts. First part deals with theoretical perspectives of neo-institutionalism also known as world culture theory, second part will delineate the contemporary trends in the institution of madrassah, and final part consist of analysis and synthesis of both theoretical perspectives in the light of the example of madrassah system.

### WORLD CULTURAL THEORY

If we look at the contemporary world, we find striking similarities between school systems around the globe. The partitioning of time into classes, knowledge into subjects, students into age groups, exams, grades etc. are few of the characteristics of a modern schools which can be found anywhere in the world. This grammar of schooling, as Cuban called it, has gained universal character.

According to the world culture theory, modern schools first emerged in the western European countries. During the period of European colonization of the world, these school models were then transmitted to other parts of the world. Thus, the modern schools have emerged from a common source (European core) and then spread to other part of the world (periphery). Over a period of time, independent nation states also adopted global educational practices which were consistent to the core-periphery model. Given that education in the core countries was closely tied with the discourse of nation-building and economic growth,

leaders in the periphery countries were eager to adopt such practices in their own peculiar circumstances. Due to this voluntary adoption of global educational practices and policy borrowing, the contemporary schooling systems became increasingly similar. On the world culturalist view, the contemporary trend of schooling is that of convergence i.e. schools across the world are converging towards a single global model instead of diverging towards opposite directions. Thus, world culturalists espouse the institutional isomorphism of global education system.

The proponents of this view are mostly sociologist. They have focused on the long-term trends in educational systems to find out whether various systems are going towards common or different forms. By collecting longitudinal data, they have been able to find out increasing homogenization in the form and structure of the schools around the world. Thus, these sociologists base their claim on empirical evidence. With this perspective, we will discuss the contemporary trends in the institution of religious education in Pakistan, called the Madrassah.

### **THE ISOMORPHISM OF CONTEMPRARY MADRASSAH**

Let us turn to our example of institution of religious seminary or madrassah as it is called in the Muslim world. The history of Madrassah dates back to 7<sup>th</sup> century AD to the time of holy prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Arabian Peninsula. The first Islamic religious school “daar-e-arqam” was established in the Mosque of Prophet in the city state of Medina. Since then, Madrassahs have always existed throughout the Muslim world, however, its form, structure and purposes have considerably changed in the modern world.

Madrassah in its traditional sense revolved around individual religious scholars. These scholars of jurisprudence were considered as institution unto themselves. Normally, these scholars would accept few disciples, teaching would take place in the house of scholar or a designated room in the mosque. This master-disciple would usually be a life-long relationship.

<sup>1</sup> <https://dailytimes.com.pk/100115/nap-and-madrassa-registration/>

However, these forms of madrassahs were radically changed during the period of British colonization in Indian subcontinent. The establishment of colonial schools and arrival of Christian missionary groups in India marked a turning point in the history of modern madrassah in India and Pakistan. These two developments posed a direct threat to Hindus and Muslims clergy alike. Given the caste-ridden society and untouchability, many low caste Indians converted to Christianity. This marked the beginning of revivalist movement in India. To counter these forces, the first modern madrassah was established at the small village of Deobandi in India.

After the partition of India in 1947, the newly established state of Pakistan provided a huge space for religious forces to operate. At the time of its creation, Pakistan had less than 300 madrassas. By 1988, it had less than 3,000 but now we have around 26,000 registered ones. Estimates on unregistered madrassas vary from 10,000 to 15,000. In the capital alone, upwards of 160 madrassas and 72 day scholar Quranic institutes are not registered with government authorities<sup>1</sup>. Madrassahs inherited their conservative mantle and were resistant to any sort of change. Anything with the semblance of modernity was seen as a plot and conspiracy and thus religious groups developed an attitude which was highly resistant to change. Even the scientific inventions were rejected outright. During my father’s generation, religious clergy was vehemently opposed to electricity and loudspeakers. During my generation, same people were rejecting the use of radio, TV, cable channels, internet and mobile phones, social media. Now the situation is completely different. All these ‘condemned’ scientific inventions are very much in use in all sections including the conservative clerical class.

Now we turn to the issue of institutional isomorphism and madrassahs in Pakistan. If we look at the evolutionary trajectory of the madrassah system in Pakistan, the claim of the world cultural theorists seems to hold true. Through all this time, Madrassahs are increasingly getting similar to

government schools and have adopted almost all the features of any public school in Pakistan.

#### Centralized Bureaucracy

From discreet and isolated institutions, madrassahs have developed a centralized bureaucratic system called 'wafaq-ul-madaris' (federation of madrassahs). From a humble beginning in 1959, the federation emerged as a strong governing and regulatory body. It performs many important functions. It has been able to impose a standardized exam which is conducted throughout the country on a same date. Qualification of this exam is a mandatory condition for getting a 'sanad' (certificate). The federation also has the powers to grant affiliations to the madrassahs, which has further increased the power of the federation. It negotiates with the government in all matters and reforms pertaining to the madrassahs. With the passage of time, there has been a growing tendency towards the centralization of powers in the hands of the federation.

The federation also acts as an accreditation body. In its earlier forms of existence, the individual religious scholar would write a letter for his disciple with his stamp on it. This letter served as a kind of certificate for the disciple. In later times when the modern madrassah emerged during colonial period, this task was shifted from the religious scholar to the madrassahs administration. Now it is the federation which confers degrees and certificates on individual graduates. Madrassahs have also developed their own elaborate form of the 'grammar of schooling'. Although it does look exactly the same, but the underlying logic is very similar. There is a hierarchy of madrassahs, time and space are divided, fields of expertise are defined, evaluation system put in place, degrees are awarded etc. Thus, the federation has emerged as a full-fledged ministry of education with its own bureaucracy. It confers degrees, grants affiliations to new madrassahs, set curriculum, conducts exams, issues religious edicts, and frame uniform policies which almost have the sanctity of law.

#### Iqra Schools

One of the interesting development in recent time is the emergence of Iqra Schools in the country. Iqra School is a new phenomenon. These are the private schools affiliated with the government not the federation of Madarassahs but are run by

religious clergy. These schools have developed as a hybrid form of both madrassah and the common schools. Being affiliated with the government, they follow the official curriculum, are subject to common school exams and teach recommended textbooks. Students are also awarded degrees by ministry of education like any normal school. However, the only difference between normal and Iqra school is that the latter teach additional religious subjects, which are not part of official curriculum. These schools have created a new space, merging both the spiritual dimension of religious teachings and to excel in the material world. While the traditional madrassah would focus on the life hereafter and normal school preparing students for this life, the Iqra school has struck a middle path by merging both spiritual and material.

These schools are increasingly becoming popular among the masses. They have attracted attention of a conservative sections of the society who were religiously inclined but were also aware of the lack of social mobility with madrassah education. Iqra schools have provided them with an opportunity to get best of both worlds. Although the 'Iqra' phenomenon is an offshoot of madrassah system, but it can pose a great challenge to its own creator in the future.

If we look at the education system in Pakistan, the greatest social-economic mobility is attached with the elite private school, with English as medium of instruction. These schools mostly follow the Cambridge Assessment International Education, their curriculum and textbooks. Government schools, though there is a vast variety of them, offer less social mobility than private schools. Majority have Urdu as medium of instruction and follow government approved curriculum, and textbook with traditional methods of teaching and rote learning. However, madrassah offers least social mobility in the society. With its very narrow focus on religious teachings and neglecting the established fields of science, social studies and math, graduates of the madrassahs are the most vulnerable in the society. With little economic opportunity, poverty, and conservative ideologies, these groups become a potential site for extremist tendencies.

In this context, Iqra schools can provide an alternative to the section of society which traditionally send their children to madrassahs. But there is a catch. Madrassah mostly offers free or nearly free accommodation and food, and charges very little or no fee. Most of the time, they are run with the help and support of the local community and mosque. On other hand, Iqra schools have no such features. It is just like a normal school with considerable fee. Thus, for a poor conservative class of the society, it is a choice between nearly free madrassah with little future prospects against the Iqra schools which has initial economic costs but with greater future prospects.

#### Madrassah and Neoliberalism

Until now, we have discussed the trend of convergence in educational practices in Pakistan by looking into a particular case of religious educational institutions. There is a visible trend in madrassahs of becoming more similar and homogenized over a period of time, which give credence to the world cultural theory. Besides institutional isomorphism which focus on structure and practices, there has also been a shift in the purposes of the religious schools.

The function of the madrassah was never to prepare students for this life. In fact, the philosophies that these religious institutions espoused were highly critical of the material world. Students were encouraged to shun mundane life and focus on spiritual dimensions of existence. The religious philosophy of their teaching depicted this life as impure and temporary while the hereafter as pure and permanent. The route to the permanent blissful life in hereafter went through the renunciation of this material life. However, this philosophy seems to be changing in the globalized world and madrassahs seem to be embracing neoliberal logics of development of 'human capital'.

Schools are social institutions. Governments, political parties, reformers, intellectuals and ordinary citizens, all want this social institution to perform particular functions that would serve their needs. There are myriad of expectations from schools depending where one is coming from. For example, in US, schools were first established as institutions of political socialization, which

emphasized democratic norms and social obligations, to serve the needs of the newly established republic. With the rapid industrial growth and immigration, the functions of the schools drifted away from its original goal and gradually shifted towards achieving social efficiency and economic growth. But from the perspective of the 'consumers' of education system, they wanted schools to perform the function of enhance their social advantage and economic gains. During the rise of neoliberal economic ideologies in the second half of the twentieth century, this aspect of schooling started to dominate all other aspects of education system. Therefore, schools became institutions whose primary function was to prepare children for future economic life and with it the entire focus of schools shifted towards development of human capital to take on that economic role.

Today, this role of education to develop human capital has become a dominant function of the schooling around the world. However, in Pakistan the madrassahs were comparatively immune to such 'worldly ideologies' but not for long. The graduates which madrassah system was producing were highly disadvantaged. They had no technical skills and lacked all the factors that was needed to succeed in the Pakistani society. But with the passage of time, large madrassahs in big urban centers started to diversify their curriculum to include English language courses and computer literacy programs alongside with religious teachings. Soon many other big madrassahs started emulating this policy to diversify the skills of the students. In a course of time, market forces duly infiltrated and started to affect the core function of the religious educational institution. This was also the major reason behind the emergence of Iqra schools in the country.

Today, big madrassahs have transformed to the extent to give them a look of a modern university. Along with modern facilities like library and computer labs, these madrassahs have even established various departments to teach modern subjects. For example, Jamia Binoria<sup>2</sup> Karachi has the departments of English language, computer education, journalism and broadcasting. Dar-ul-

<sup>2</sup> <https://binoria.org/about-us/>

uloom Karachi offers certification in math, politics, developmental studies, English language and information technology. Similar departments are established in many other urban madrassahs. One of the most interesting case is that of Minhaj-ul-Quran, Lahore, which was established in 1980 by a famous religious scholar and a political leader, Tahir-ul-Qadri. After six years, the madrassah managed to initiate various academic programs in natural and social sciences. Eventually, it grew into a full fledged university and broke with its parent madrassah. In 2005, government recognized Minhaj-ul-Quran<sup>3</sup> University as a degree awarding university. Thus, it was a madrassah which gave rise to a modern university.

#### Women participation

Another area which highlights the converging trend in educational practices is the decreasing resistance towards the education of the girls. In Pakistan, madrassah has been a traditional domain of men. Women mostly got religious education within the confines of their homes. This education would include learning to read Quran and memorize verses from the holy book. Women were generally not expected to carry out advance scholarly work in Islamic jurisprudence and religious philosophy. Among the conservative section of society, women are mostly trained as a house maker with little contact of outside world. But this trend is also changing.

Girls education is a hotly contested issue among the more conservative religious groups in Pakistan. This issue became more salient after the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan and its spill over in Pakistan. The extreme right groups inspired by the ideology of Taliban vehemently opposed girls' education. In fact, militant groups particularly targeted girls' public schools in the Pakistani regions near afghan border. According to Human Rights Watch, over 900 girls' schools were forced to close and over 120,000 girls stopped attending school. About 8,000 female teachers were driven out of work. For many girls, the loss was

permanent, and they were not able to return to school even after the army displaced the Taliban<sup>4</sup>. But not all religious groups are against girls' education. There has been a remarkable shift in the attitude towards female education in other regions of the country, mostly the urban centers. The guardian reports that female madrasas in Pakistan are expanding at a dramatic rate. Female madrasas were virtually unheard of in Pakistan before the late 1970s; the religious institutions have always been aimed at males. However, there are around 2000 registered madrassahs for girls in Pakistan while many more are unregistered and unregulated<sup>5</sup>. Given the history of the religious groups, this shows a marked shift in their attitude towards female education. More girls are encouraged to get religious education than ever before.

#### Contemporary trends

In the light of these developments, it is evident that there is increasing homogenization of educational practices and institutional structures in the religious education system in Pakistan. The global convergence of educational practices also holds true for Pakistan. Here, we have focused not on formal schooling system run under the government but a non-formal religious educational institution which also support the hypothesis of world culture theorists.

If we observe the contemporary convergence trend, it is highly likely that in coming decades, Pakistan's parallel education systems of public schools and private madrassahs will be more homogenized. In fact, my hypothesis is that both these systems are increasingly getting closer to each other to the point that they might merge together. Here are the reasons.

The government of Pakistan has shown some interest to mainstream madrassah education in the country. Madrassahs have always been in private domains and thus immune to state's authority. But government started a large-scale program to register all madrassahs in the country. Until 1992,

<sup>3</sup> <https://mul.edu.pk/education/28/About-the-University.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/03/pakistan-surge-militant-attacks-schools>

<sup>5</sup>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/14/pakistan-madrasas-islam-girls-women>

only big madrassahs were registered with the government as charity institutions as per the British era law of 1860. But this law was changed in 1992 and according to the new comprehensive procedures, presently, there are around 35,000 thousand registered madrassahs in Pakistan<sup>6</sup>. This registration process also enabled the government to exert its influence on the religious institutions. In a series of steps, government recognized the certificates issued by the Federation of Madrassahs to be equivalent to the college and university degrees. The first step was taken in 1980, when the final certificate issued by madrassah was declared as equal to university master's degree in Arabic language and Islamic studies. On later stages, government also granted equivalency to other certificates of madrassah with certain conditions. Like undergraduate equivalency was given to madrassah lower certificates if madrassah students are taught Pakistan Studies, English and few other courses. Similar conditions were also put in place for other certifications of the madrassahs.

Thus, the chasm between the government schools and madrassahs is shrinking. Today, most of madrassahs in urban are teaching modern subjects along with the traditional religious subjects. More and more students are becoming eligible for higher university degrees. It also holds true for jobs. With government granting madrassah certificates equal status with university and college degrees, more students of madrassahs are becoming eligible for government jobs. The earlier lack of social mobility for madrassah graduates is also decreasing and there are more opportunities for them in job market. The emergence of Iqra schools is becoming more popular, which are normal schools but with few additional subjects of religion. This is a new phenomenon, and if its popularity remained constant, one wonders that it might replace tradition madrassahs in the future.

<sup>6</sup> Khalil, Umair (2015), *The Madrasah Conundrum*, HIVE, Karachi.  
([https://www.academia.edu/17631134/The\\_Madrassa\\_Conundrum\\_State\\_of\\_Religious\\_Education\\_in\\_Pakistan](https://www.academia.edu/17631134/The_Madrassa_Conundrum_State_of_Religious_Education_in_Pakistan))

### Critique of World Culture Theory

World culture theory presents a convincing argument backed by empirical research. On their view, the history of public funded mass schooling coincides with the rise of modern nation-state in Europe. According to Ramirez<sup>7</sup>, school were part of the project of a nation-state to transform its people of different belongings and loyalties into a collective single body of citizens. Thus, education from the beginning had a political agenda and was closely tied with the nation-state's agenda of nation-building. During the period of decolonization in twentieth century, the newly independent nation-states adopted same policy of carrying forward the agenda of nation-building through formal educational system well into the twenty first century. Not only the world is getting similar, but the institutions which work within that framework are also becoming homogenized – education being no exception.

However, there are certain limitations in the theory. On this view, the homogenization of the educational institutions is a result of voluntary adoption of global practices. Cultural theorists claim that these practices are voluntarily adopted by other system due to the fact that education is mostly seen a 'modernizing agent', thus leaders from across the world intentionally adopt these practices for the purposes of gaining legitimacy and political ground. But this claim, at best, is a partial explanation of the facts and effectively conceals the coercive mechanisms involved in dissemination of educational practices worldwide. This might include conditionalities attached by donor agencies like World Bank, USAID and other donor agencies or states. Since cultural theorist base their claim on 'voluntariness', their theory is also meticulously silent about the resistance when it comes to the implementation of those global practices. Bartlett has rightly pointed out that world culture theory ignores political power, ideologies, and coercive invisible coercive mechanism behind institutional isomorphism<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Francisco O. Ramirez, *Toward Post-National Societies and Global Citizenship*, *Multicultural Education Review* Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 1-28

<sup>8</sup> Lesley Bartlett (2003), *World Culture Or Transnational Project? Competing Educational*

“Whose culture acquires worldwide standing? Is not the triumph of the West a central dynamic in modern history? Is not imperialism the mother of institutional isomorphism? Is not coercion the most important mechanism through which common educational models diffuse worldwide? Why is world culture theory silent as regards the issue of power?”<sup>9</sup>

Institutional isomorphism of madrassahs did happen, but to what extent it was voluntary adoption of practices is still debatable. Like any institution, madrassahs are not immune to global and local pressures. This is more true after the US invasion of Afghanistan, when madrassahs came to spotlight for its allegedly involvement in terrorist activities. There was intense pressure for madrassah reforms from both national government and global forces. There were many efforts to regulate madrassahs, purge its curriculum from extremist ideologies and modernize the institution. Global market forces and its ideologies of human capital development also acted on madrassahs, which led to inclusion of modern subjects like basic sciences, computer and skills development. Anthropologists argue that this focus on institutional structures and transfer of global practices from the western countries to other regions misses crucial points. Adoption of global practices often face resistance from the local cultures. Global policies and practices are not implanted in local cultures in pristine form but are changed, molded, rejected and fashioned according to the local circumstances. Secondly, the transfer of practices is not a one-way street. Local practices also move into global arena, as was shown by Bartlett while studying the education system of Brazil which was inspired by Freire’s pedagogy. While there are visible signs of increasing uniformity in practices and structures in religious educational institutions in Pakistan, there are also

sings of local alterations, rejections and changing of practices to suit the local needs. We take the example of teaching of fundamental human rights. Yun-Kyung Cha studied the content of social studies textbooks regarding the teaching of human rights and found that the topic was made part of the curriculum in almost all countries<sup>10</sup>. However, if we look at the textbooks from Pakistan, the topic is meticulously absent from the books. Instead, the whole discourse of fundamental rights is framed in the light of religion, with emphasis on duties towards state and fellow Muslims instead of inherent rights. This tendency is more pronounced in madrassahs where the entire focus is on emphasizing one’s duties towards his/her creator.

The teaching profession is another key area which does not go well with the explanation of neo-institutionalists/world culture theorists. Teaching practices might be borrowed but a teacher is historically constructed. Thus, describing a teacher in a Pakistani context is very difficult because of its peculiar history of religion, nationalism, colonialism, and neoliberal practices. As Jason Beech has rightly pointed out that “local places are assumed to be pure and untouched prior to contact with these new global forces.”<sup>11</sup> In Pakistan, generally it is teacher not curriculum that occupies a central position. The job of a teacher is not technical one to facilitate learning through curriculum, but the teacher is expected to be a wise person who knows things and gives advice and have a status of a mentor. But at the same time, they have very low social status in the country. This might seem paradoxical, but in public discourse, teacher is highly respectable, in reality, it is the opposite. These local variations are hardly taken into account in world cultural model.

Similarly, how teachers teach, what they teach, which lessons are ignored, which are highlighted, are some other fundamental questions which the

Projects in Brazil, in Kathryn Anderson-Levitt, *Local Meaning, Global Schooling*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

<sup>9</sup> Kathryn Anderson-Levitt (2003), *Local Meaning, Global Schooling*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York. P. 249

<sup>10</sup> Yun-Kyung Cha (2014) , *The Institutionalization of Multicultural Education as a Global Policy Agenda*, Asia-Pacific Edu Res 23(1):83–91

<sup>11</sup> Jason Beech & Alejandro Artopoulos (2016) Interpreting the circulation of educational discourse across space: searching for new vocabularies, *Globalization, Societies and Education*, 14:2, 251-271, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2015.1025713

anthropological critics talk about. For example, the lesson on human evolution and Darwinism is included in biology course, but in practice, it gets ignored or taught in a very misleading way to prove its wrong. Teaching the subjects of history and social studies are more problematic. The teachers of ethnic minority groups do not buy national narrative and are critical of it. Textbooks are highly value laden and often depict the leaders of religious and ethnic minority groups in a stereotypical way. Many notable events are ignored, and minor events are highlighted out of proportion. There are numerous studying focusing on distortion, misrepresentations of facts, bias against minorities and promotions of militaristic values in the textbooks of social studies and history.

Finally, it is wrong to assume that all Muslims are alike and there are no internal divisions. There is a great deal of diversity among the Muslims of Pakistan. Not only are they divided along ethnic, class and regional lines, there are many divisions within Muslim identity. Every madrassah follows her own sectarian identity. There are sharp ideological differences between madrassahs of different sects, with each having its own curriculum and books.

There are other complications as well due to its colonial past. The colonial state tried to 'impose' modernity from above on a population which was very different from European societies. In fact, most of historians agree that the emergence of various ethnic and religious identities are the outcome of British colonial policies and its administrative mechanisms. There have been beneficiaries of the system and also those who are on the receiving end. Also, that the colonial privilege was unevenly distributed among loyal and dissidents, urban and rural divide and on lines of ethnicity. There are myriad of forces acting upon the institutions of postcolonial Pakistan, including the religious schools.

One can also look at things from the perspective of global complexity espoused by John Urry<sup>12</sup>. From his perspective, we can problematize the binary divisions of colonial and postcolonial, local and global, religious and public schools etc. Once

isolated madrassahs are now integrated into global web of networks. They are no more technology illiterate. Many madrassahs have global connections, use internet, offer online courses, connected with media channels, and their religious scholars travel frequently across the globe. They act just like another international non-governmental organization with considerable political influence on local and global politics.

To conclude, it is pertinent to say that world culture theory does offer an explanation on the meta-theoretical level. Their claim of institutional isomorphism is indeed supported by the data. The culturalists take a longitudinal view of history to identify the global trends in order to support their claim of convergence. By looking at the 'big picture', these theorists have mostly relied on the quantifiable variables like structures, pedagogy, curriculum etc. to substantiate their theoretical position. By contrast, the critics base their claims on anthropological fieldworks. As in any anthropological research, it takes a detailed, in-depth qualitative view of particular case(s). By doing so, they have highlight many variations in the system of institutional homogenization. Both theories have their strengths and limitations and together, they present a more holistic picture of the process of institutional isomorphism.

<sup>12</sup> Urry, John (2005), *The Complexities of the Global, Theory, Culture & Society* (SAGE, London, Thousand

Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 22(5): 235–254 DOI: 10.1177/0263276405057201