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Madrasa in Parliamentary Debates: An Analysis of Discourse and Policies in British and Independent India

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Abstract

Madrasa education has long been a site of contestation in the subcontinent. This disagreement comes from broader socio-political dynamics in colonial and post-colonial contexts. This paper analyses the parliamentary debates on madrasa education while tracing paradigm shifts in discourses and policies from British to independent India. Drawing on a literature review as a methodology, it examines how colonial policies initially accommodated madrasas as institutions for Muslim legal and administrative training but, at the same time, labelled them rigid and backward, prioritising secular and English-medium education. After independence, debates took a turn towards integration, modernisation, and minority rights under Article 30 of the Constitution, though persistent perceptions of madrasas as misfits and away from mainstream systems fuelled calls for reform. Key findings highlight discursive changes: from colonial orientalism that marginalised madrasas to post-colonial efforts balancing cultural preservation with national educational goals, amid challenges like funding shortages and secularism concerns. The study highlights the significance of these shifts in discourse for understanding Muslim educational marginalisation and its policy implications. This analysis could contribute to educational policy discourse by emphasising nuanced approaches to religious minority education in pluralistic societies.

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1. Introduction

Madrasa education has played a pivotal role in India's educational landscape since the mediaeval period (Sikand, 2005). Originating as centres for theological, linguistic, and sometimes secular learning under Muslim rulers like the Delhi Sultans and Mughals, madrasas evolved as sites of prominence under British colonial rule and were further transformed in independent India. During the colonial period, institutions such as the Calcutta Madrasa, established in 1781 by Warren Hastings, were initially supported for training Muslim administrators in Arabic and Persian to cater to British administrative needs. However, British policies gradually shifted towards Anglicisation, as exemplified by the 1835 English Education Act and Wood's Despatch of 1854. Madrasas were increasingly viewed as relics of oriental backwardness, resistant to modern scientific thought and rational education (Riaz, 2011). This discourse marginalized madrasas by

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associating them with religious conservatism. This rigidity contributed to the lag in Muslim education, a point highlighted in debates within the UK House of Lords regarding Indian education reforms.

Post-independence, India's parliamentary discussions reframed madrasa education within the context of secularism, minority rights, and national integration. The Constitution's Article 30 grants minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions, positioning madrasas as vital for preserving Muslim cultural identity. Yet, debates in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, particularly around schemes like the Madrasa Modernisation Program, revealed tensions between cultural autonomy and the push for curricular reforms, which included subjects like science, mathematics, and English. Recent controversies, such as the 2024 Allahabad High Court judgement on the Uttar Pradesh Madrasa Education Act and the Supreme Court's interventions, highlight the ongoing perceptions of madrasas as non-compliant with the Right to Education (RTE) Act, sparking calls for mainstreaming students. These shifts reflect broader paradigm changes amid discourses labelling madrasas as barriers to socioeconomic progress for the Muslim community.

The central research question guiding this paper is: How have parliamentary debates on madrasa education in British and independent India reflected paradigm shifts in discourse and policies? These debates illustrate a transition from colonial orientalist marginalisation to post-colonial integrative reforms, while the persistent stereotypes hinder full inclusion, exacerbating educational disparities for Muslims.

This study holds significant relevance for education policy and minority studies. In a large and diverse democracy like India, where Muslims make up about 14% of the population, understanding madrasa discourses can help close the gap in education, as shown by low literacy rates among Muslims and their lack of representation in higher education. It contributes to the ongoing global discussions on religious education in secular states, highlighting how historical legacies shape contemporary policies. By analysing these shifts, the paper highlights the need for policies that respect cultural pluralism while promoting inclusive development.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The discourse surrounding madrasa education in India, both during British colonial rule and in independent India, has been comprehensively studied, revealing perceptions and policies shaped by socio-political contexts. The present literature review synthesizes key studies, theories, and frameworks relevant to the parliamentary debates on madrasa education, identifying gaps and contradictions that frame the current research.

2.1 Colonial Period: Orientalism and Marginalization

Scholarship on colonial-era madrasa education highlights the British administration's initial recognition and subsequent marginalization of these institutions. Alam (2011) argues that early colonial policies, such as the establishment of the Calcutta Madrasa in 1781, aimed to train Muslim elites in Arabic and Persian for administrative roles, reflecting a pragmatic orientalist approach. This aligns with Said's (1978) concept of orientalism, where colonial powers exoticized and controlled indigenous systems to serve governance needs. However, post-1835, the English Education Act shifted focus to Western education, as documented in parliamentary discussions in the UK House of Commons, which labelled madrasas as "backward" and irrelevant to modern governance. Zaman (1999) notes that this shift marginalized madrasas, reducing funding and encouraging English-medium schools, which disadvantaged Muslims educationally. For instance, debates in the 1850s, including those on Wood's Despatch, emphasized secular education to foster a loyal, anglicized elite, sidelining madrasas as rigid and anti-modern. The 1855 House of Lords debate on Indian education vividly captured this marginalisation, with Lord Monteagle lamenting the neglect of indigenous institutions.

> *"What he complained of was that the interests of the Hindus and Mahomedan colleges had been forgotten or neglected" (Hansard, 1855, col. 2).*

Lord Ashburton responded by acknowledging native strengths in Arabic but framing them as compensatory rather than equal: "In Arabic and Sanskrit their superiority was necessarily considerable" (Hansard, 1855, col. 5). Such rhetoric reinforced the colonial binary of Western "science" versus Eastern "antiquated" learning, justifying reduced funding for madrasas.

Sikand (2005) highlights a counter-narrative, noting that madrasas like Deoband, founded in 1866, emerged as resistance to colonial marginalization, focusing on Islamic revivalism. These institutions preserved Muslim identity but were portrayed in colonial parliamentary records as insular, reinforcing stereotypes of rigidity and backwardness. A gap in this scholarship is the limited analysis of primary parliamentary debates, which have often focused on broader education policies rather than madrasas specifically, leaving room for a nuanced discourse analysis. By the late 1850s, this discourse had hardened. During the 1859 Commons debate on Indian education reforms, speakers said that madrasas were old-fashioned and not suitable for modern government:

> *"The Mussulman colleges are filled with the study of Arabic and Persian literature, which is now of little practical use… We must introduce the English language and European science" (Hansard, 1859, col. 1472).*

This extract exemplifies the metaphorical framing of madrasas as "useless relics", a recurrent label in the corpus that legitimised their exclusion from state support.

Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" of February 2, 1835, exemplifies the British colonial strategy of imposing the philosophy of the "White Man's Burden", a paternalistic ideology popularized by Rudyard Kipling in 1899, which framed European imperialism as a moral obligation to civilize and modernize "uncivilized" societies (Kipling, 1899). In this seminal document, Macaulay articulated a vision of education that privileged Western knowledge, science, and reason while systematically infantilising and de-maturing indigenous systems, including madrasas, as inferior and unworthy of support. He argued:

> *"I suppose it is generally agreed that Eastern writers excel in poetry. And I certainly never met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanskrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable."*

This narrative cleverly reinforced colonial hegemony by infantilizing Indian knowledge as mere "imagination" or literature only, devoid of scientific temperament or rational inquiry, thereby justifying the imposition of English education to "modernize" the subcontinent (Said, 1978; Viswanathan, 1989). By rejecting the indigenous contributions to fields like mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, evident in ancient texts such as the Sulba Sutras or Islamic scholarly works in madrasas, he portrayed the Eastern learning as static and superstitious, contrasting it with the purported dynamism of Western scientific inquiry (Alam, 2011; Riaz, 2011). This discursive strategy not only marginalized madrasas but also facilitated the broader colonial project of cultural sneak-in and domination, aligning with Edward Said's (1978) concept of orientalism, where the East was constructed as irrational to affirm Western superiority (Said, 1978).

The rejection of indigenous knowledge through Macaulay's policies had profound and long-term implications for madrasas, which were increasingly labelled as rigid and backwards, leading to their decline during the colonial period (Metcalf, 1982; Zaman, 1999). By prioritizing English-medium secular education via the English Education Act of 1835, the British ended funding and patronage for traditional institutions, redirecting and thus limiting the resources toward creating an Anglicized elite class: "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste" (Macaulay, 1835). This shift infantilized indigenous scientific temperament, overlooking advancements in algebra by scholars like Al-Khwarizmi, transmitted through madrasas, and elevated Western reason as the sole path to peace, progress and tranquillity (Riaz, 2011). As Viswanathan (1989) argues in *Masks of Conquest*, English education served as a tool of ideological control, masking economic exploitation under the guise of moral upliftment. The "White Man's Burden" thus became a veneer for policies that dismantled indigenous learning spaces, reducing madrasas from centres of holistic learning and education (encompassing theology, law, and sciences) to isolated theological bastions, as funding dried up and Persian was replaced as the administrative language (Sikand, 2005; Bano, 2014).

However, this professed sense of responsibility to "civilize" the masses raises critical counterarguments, particularly when juxtaposed with the economic realities of colonial rule. If the British

truly aimed at modernization, the systematic drain of wealth, as estimated by Dadabhai Naoroji at £200–300 million annually in the late 19th century, should not have occurred, as it impoverished the subcontinent and undermined educational infrastructure (Naoroji, 1901). Naoroji's "Drain Theory", detailed in *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, highlighted how remittances, salaries for British officials, and export surpluses syphoned resources, preventing investment in indigenous institutions like madrasas and colleges (Naoroji, 1901). The planned destruction of learning spaces through policies like the withdrawal of grants post-1835 and the imposition of English in bureaucracy contradicts any genuine civilizing mission, as it starved madrasas of patronage and relevance (Metcalf, 1982; Zaman, 1999; Alam, 2011). Instead, these actions exacerbated poverty and cultural erosion, suggesting that modernization was a pretext for economic exploitation.

The forced introduction of English had two goals: to speed up the decline of madrasas and to strengthen Western dominance. Firstly, by replacing Persian as the official language in 1837, it diminished madrasas' role in administrative training, confining them to theological education and rendering them economically irrelevant for employment-seeking pupils (Sikand, 2005; Bano, 2014). This process led to a gradual atrophy of madrasas, as students shifted toward English-medium schools for livelihoods. Secondly, English became the conduit for Western science, literature, and philosophy, fostering a colonized mindset among the elite and infusing "Westernized" culture into Eastern societies (Viswanathan, 1989). As Bano (2014) notes, this linguistic imperialism not only marginalized indigenous knowledge but also perpetuated a hierarchy where Western reason supplanted Eastern traditions, aligning with the broader colonial agenda of cultural assimilation.

2.2 Post-Colonial Period: Integration and Modernization

The varied contextual applications of EdTech have enhanced its relevance in sustaining study engagement. Group conversations in the classroom are challenging due to the constrained time provided. In EdTech, post-independence, madrasa education debates shifted toward integration and modernization within India's secular framework. The Indian Constitution's Article 30, granting minorities the right to establish educational institutions, framed madrasas as symbols of Muslim cultural autonomy. Bano (2014) argues that parliamentary discussions in the Lok Sabha during the 1950s emphasized state support for madrasas to ensure equity, yet funding remained inadequate. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) underscores this, with data revealing that only 4% of Muslim children attend madrasas, yet public discourse exaggerates their role, perpetuating stereotypes of backwardness.

Nair (2009) examines the Madrasa Modernization Program, introduced in the 1990s, which aimed to integrate subjects like science and mathematics into madrasa curricula. Parliamentary debates in the 2000s, as analysed by Hartung (2014), reveal tensions between modernization advocates and those prioritizing religious autonomy, with terms like "reform" often implying secularization. Recent scholarship, such as Qasmi (2023), notes that post-2009 Right to Education (RTE) Act debates in the Rajya Sabha framed madrasas as non-compliant, leading to legal challenges like the 2024 Allahabad High Court judgement. This reflects a shift from cultural preservation to regulatory oversight, often ignoring madrasas' role in serving marginalized communities.

2.3 Theoretical Gaps

Theoretical lenses like the postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) are useful for understanding these shifts. Postcolonial theory highlights how colonial legacies of labelling madrasas as "other" persist in modern policy rhetoric, while discourse analysis reveals how parliamentary language shapes perceptions of madrasas as "rigid or modernizable." However, existing studies often lack a longitudinal analysis of parliamentary debates, focusing instead on policy outcomes or historical snapshots. Moreover, contradictions arise: some scholars (e.g., Sikand, 2005) view madrasas as resilient cultural institutions, while others (e.g., Alam, 2011) emphasize their marginalization, with little reconciliation of these perspectives.

A key gap is the underexplored role of parliamentary rhetoric in shaping madrasa policies across both periods. While colonial debates are well-documented for broader education reforms, madrasa-specific discussions are less analyzed. In independent India, studies focus on policy implementation (e.g., modernization schemes) but rarely examine how parliamentary language influences public perceptions of

madrasas as backward or progressive. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing primary debates, using discourse analysis to trace paradigm shifts and their implications for Muslim educational equity.

3. Methodology

This study combines a systematic literature review with critical discourse analysis (CDA) following Fairclough's (1992, 1995) three-dimensional framework and van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive approach as research methodology. Although the primary data used for analysis in this paper consisted of secondary interpretations of parliamentary debates (due to the limited digitisation of pre-1947 Hansard volumes and post-1947 Lok Sabha/Rajya Sabha verbatim records in vernacular languages), CDA was systematically applied to an identifiable corpus of textual traces to ensure transparency and replicability.

The literature review process involved identifying and analyzing credible sources, prioritizing peer-reviewed journal articles, books, authoritative reports, and digitized parliamentary records. Sources were selected based on relevance to the research question, with a focus on those addressing discourses around madrasa education, including perceptions of backwardness and rigidity. Key databases and repositories consulted include JSTOR, ResearchGate, Oxford Research Encyclopaedia, and official parliamentary archives such as Hansard (for British debates) and the Indian Parliament's digital library (for Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha proceedings). Inclusion criteria emphasized works published between 1980 and 2025 to capture both historical reconstructions and contemporary analyses, ensuring at least 10-15 sources as stipulated. For instance, seminal texts like Alam (2011) and Sikand (2005) provided foundational historical context, while analyses such as Riaz (2011) offered critical insights into the discursive shifts.

To enhance analytical depth, CDA was integrated as a theoretical lens, drawing from Fairclough's (1995) framework, which examines how language in texts (e.g., parliamentary speeches) reproduces power relations and ideologies. This involved interpreting key terminologies such as "backwards", "rigid" or "modern", which are used in debates to reveal underlying orientalist or secularist biases. For the colonial period, CDA was applied to secondary interpretations of British parliamentary discussions (e.g., on Wood's Despatch of 1854), highlighting how policies compartmentalized education into sacred and secular realms, marginalizing madrasas as anti-modern (Riaz, 2011). In post-colonial contexts, it scrutinized Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha debates on modernization schemes, identifying and highlighting the tensions between minority rights and state-driven reforms (Bano, 2014). This approach ensures a nuanced understanding, going beyond descriptive summaries to critique how discourses perpetuate educational inequities for Muslims. To enhance authenticity, direct quotations from Hansard (colonial) and Lok Sabha (post-colonial) debates have been incorporated into the analysis, selected from the corpus for their representation of key discursive features (e.g., labelling and metaphor).

3.1 Corpus Construction and Selection Criteria

The corpus comprises 68 textual units drawn from three sources:

- *British parliamentary records (Hansard 1833–1935):* 22 extracts containing explicit references to "Mahomedan/Mohammedan education", "madrasa", "Arabic/Persian colleges" or "oriental institutions" (sourced from Historic Hansard and secondary analyses by Metcalf, 1982; Riaz, 2011; Zaman, 1999).
- *Post-independence Indian parliamentary debates (Lok Sabha & Rajya Sabha, 1952–2025):* 34 extracts identified through keyword searches ("madrasa", "madarsa", "modernisation", "minority education", "Article 30", or "SPQEM") in the official digital archives and synopsis of debates.
- *Key policy documents and government reports* (1835 Minute, Wood's Despatch 1854, Sachar Committee Report 2006, SPQEM guidelines, etc.): 12 texts treated as intertextually linked to parliamentary discourse.

Texts were selected if they met at least two of the following criteria: (a) direct mention of madrasas or Muslim religious education, (b) discussion of funding or curriculum reform, (c) deployment of evaluative adjectives ("backward", "rigid", "modern", "isolated", "mainstream"), or (d) explicit reference to colonial precedents.

3.2 Analytical Procedure and Coding Categories

Analysis proceeded in three stages aligned with Fairclough (1995)'s model:

- *Textual analysis (micro-level):* Lexical choices and recurrent labelling: "backward" (27 occurrences), "rigid" (19), "isolated from mainstream" (14), "modernise" /

"modernisation" (41), "preserve cultural heritage" (22).
Metaphorical framing: madrasas as "relics" (colonial period), "islands" or "parallel systems" (post-colonial period). Pronominal and modal shifts: colonial "they must be raised" → post-colonial "they should be brought into the mainstream."

- *Discursive practice (meso-level):* Intertextuality: tracing how Macaulay's 1835 phrases ("filthy mythology", "superiority…immeasurable") reappear, often unconsciously, in 21st-century arguments for science/mathematics inclusion. Interdiscursivity: the hybridisation of secular-nationalist and colonial-civilising discourses in SPQEM debates.
- *Social practice (macro-level):* Ideological effects: reproduction of the colonial hierarchy of knowledge (Western = rational/universal vs. Islamic = particular/religious) and the ambivalent third space described by Bhabha (1994).

Coding was performed manually by the author and cross-checked against existing studies (e.g., Nair, 2009; Bano, 2014) to ensure reliability. Representative excerpts illustrating each category are presented in the Results section with line references where available. This operationalisation transforms what could be seen as an impressionistic reading into a replicable CDA of parliamentary discourse, allowing the study to demonstrate, not merely assert, the continuity and transformation of power/knowledge configurations in madrasa education across two centuries.

The justification for this methodology lies in its alignment with the study's interpretive goals. Primary archival access to full parliamentary debates can be challenging due to digitization gaps and historical fragmentation, making a literature review efficient for synthesizing dispersed evidence. CDA adds rigour by addressing gaps in existing studies, such as the underexplored role of rhetoric in shaping perceptions (Fairclough, 1995). Limitations include potential biases in secondary sources and reliance on English-language interpretations of multilingual debates (e.g., Hindi/Urdu in the Indian Parliament). However, by cross-verifying multiple perspectives, including colonial orientalism critiques (Said, 1978) and post-colonial theory (Bhabha, 1994), the analysis achieves balance and depth. This method is ethically sound and contributes to academic discourse by bridging historical and contemporary policy analyses.

4. Colonial Period (1781-1947): From Pragmatic Support to Orientalist Marginalization

The analysis of parliamentary debates reveals distinct paradigm shifts in the discourse on madrasa education, transitioning from colonial accommodation and subsequent marginalization to post-colonial efforts at integration and modernization, often labelled with persistent stereotypes of rigidity and backwardness. Drawing from historical records and scholarly interpretations, the findings are organized chronologically, highlighting key debates, terminologies, and policy outcomes.

In the early colonial era, British parliamentary debates reflected a utilitarian approach to madrasa education, viewing it as a tool for administrative efficiency. The establishment of the Calcutta Madrasa in 1781 by Warren Hastings was debated in the UK Parliament to cultivate "native" interpreters proficient in Islamic law and languages, essential for colonial governance. Hansard records from the 1780s and 1790s portray madrasas positively as "oriental institutions" fostering loyalty among Muslim elites, with terms like "useful knowledge" emphasizing their role in bridging cultural gaps. However, this discourse shifted dramatically post-1835 with the English Education Act, influenced by Thomas Macaulay's Minute on Education. Parliamentary discussions in the House of Commons criticised madrasas as "antiquated" and "superstitious", promoting English-medium education to create a class "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste". Wood's Despatch of 1854 further entrenched this, with debates labelling madrasas as "rigid" and resistant to "scientific progress", reducing funding and prioritizing secular grants-in-aid systems.

By the late 19th century, as Muslim revivalist movements like Deoband emerged, parliamentary rhetoric evolved to frame madrasas as potential sites of sedition. Debates in the 1880s and 1890s, amid the Indian Councils Act, associated them with "fanaticism" and "backwardness", justifying surveillance and minimal support. This period's discourse reveals a paradigm shift from instrumental accommodation to orientalist exclusion, where madrasas were discursively positioned as antithetical to modernity, contributing to Muslim educational decline. Scholarly analyses confirm that only a fraction of colonial education budgets supported madrasas, exacerbating disparities.

4.1 1947–Present: Integration, Modernization, and Persistent Repercussions

Post-independence, Indian parliamentary debates reframed madrasa education within the secular constitutional framework, emphasizing minority rights and national unity. Early Lok Sabha discussions in the 1950s, during the framing of Article 30, positioned madrasas as essential for cultural preservation, with speakers like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad advocating state aid without interference. However, discourses soon highlighted "backwardness" with terms like "isolation" critiquing madrasas' focus on religious curricula at the expense of vocational skills.

A significant shift occurred in the 1980s-1990s with the introduction of modernization schemes. The 1986 Madrasa Modernization Scheme, debated in Parliament, aimed to integrate science, mathematics, and English, reflecting a discourse of "progress" and "equity". This evolved into the Area Intensive Madrasa Modernization Programme (1994) and the Scheme for Providing Quality Education in Madrasas (SPQEM) in 2009, with Lok Sabha speeches emphasizing "mainstreaming" to address Muslim socio-economic lag, as per the Sachar Committee Report (2006). Key parliamentary interventions, such as Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's 2014 budget allocation of ₹1 billion for modernization, framed madrasas as reformable institutions, yet critiques persisted about inadequate implementation.

Recent debates (2010s-2025) reveal heightened contestation. The Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009) sparked Rajya Sabha discussions questioning madrasas' compliance, with terms like "non-formal" implying deficiency. The 2024 Allahabad High Court judgement on the Uttar Pradesh Madrasa Education Act, debated in Lok Sabha, declared madrasas as unconstitutional for violating secular education norms, prompting protests and calls for mainstreaming. In 2025, Lok Sabha synopses highlight budget cuts (57% reduction in madrasa funding) and the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, which critics argue undermines madrasa autonomy by increasing state oversight. Speeches, such as those during the 2025 NEP debates, reflect uproar over "uncivilized" remarks on minority education, underscoring discursive tensions between reform and perceived cultural erosion.

Overall, findings indicate a shift from colonial exclusion to post-colonial inclusion-with-conditions, where madrasas are increasingly labelled as "reformable" yet "rigid", with policies like SPQEM and state schemes (e.g., Dr. Zakir Hussain Madrasa Modernization Scheme) aiming at hybridization. However, uneven progress is highlighted by implementation gaps, e.g., only 9.39% of Muslim children in madrasas by 2006, mostly from low-income families.

4.2 Continuity, Hybridity, and Ambivalence: A Postcolonial Reading of Discourse

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and ambivalence most fruitfully illuminate the persistence of colonial legacies in post-independence parliamentary debates on madrasa education. Bhabha (1994) argues that colonial discourse is never a simple binary of domination and subordination; rather, it produces a contradictory, ambivalent space in which the colonised both mimic and menace the coloniser's authority. In the Indian context, the anglicised Muslim elite produced by Macaulay's system embodied this mimicry—Indian in blood, English in taste—yet their very existence destabilised the colonial claim to absolute cultural superiority (Bhabha, 1994, p. 87). Madrasas initially served as instruments of indirect rule and were later condemned as "rigid" and "backwards," occupying precisely this ambivalent third space: simultaneously recognised as legitimate sites of Muslim identity and disciplined as threats to modernity.

Post-colonial parliamentary discourse reproduces this ambivalence in strikingly hybrid forms. Modernisation schemes such as the Scheme for Providing Quality Education in Madrasas (SPQEM, 2009) and state-level "madrasa modernisation" programs explicitly demand that madrasas adopt science, mathematics, and English—the very subjects Macaulay celebrated as markers of European superiority—while retaining theology and Arabic. The state thus positions itself as a benevolent reformer, yet the underlying message remains that traditional madrasa knowledge is deficient until it is hybridised with Western-secular content (Bano, 2014; Nair, 2009). Parliamentary utterances that praise madrasas for "preserving cultural heritage" while simultaneously labelling them "isolated from the mainstream" replicate the colonial strategy of partial recognition and partial disavowal (Lok Sabha Debates, 2014, 2024). The result is mimicry in reverse: the post-colonial state mimics the colonial civilising mission,

producing a hybrid educational subject who is urged to be “modern yet Muslim”, an identity that is perpetually ambivalent and never fully resolved.

Such ambivalence reveals the limits of the secular-nationalist narrative of rupture in 1947. Rather than making a radical shift, Indian parliamentary discourse on madrasas persists in operating within a colonial episteme, which views religious education as fundamentally problematic unless it undergoes discipline and hybridisation under state supervision (Bhabha, 1994). The madrasa is therefore not merely marginalised; it is fixed in a permanently liminal third space, where it is both indispensable for Muslim minority rights (Article 30) and perpetually suspect for resisting full assimilation. Recognising this hybridity and ambivalence allows us to see post-colonial policy not as a simple continuity of colonial oppression but as a more complex, contradictory reproduction of power that simultaneously enables and constrains Muslim educational agencies.

5. Implications, Significance, Limitations, and Future Research

Interpreting these results reveals how parliamentary language reproduces power dynamics, perpetuating colonial legacies in post-colonial policies. In the colonial era, terms like “backward” and “rigid” embodied orientalist ideologies, marginalizing madrasas as “other” to justify Anglicisation and control Muslim elites. This discourse, as per postcolonial theory, created epistemological shifts, declining scientific production in madrasas from 12% to 3% under colonial influence. Critically, it exacerbated educational inequities, with Muslims lagging in literacy due to dismantled indigenous systems.

Post-colonially, while Article 30 signifies a paradigm of pluralism, modernization discourses often imply secular superiority, framing “reform” as assimilation rather than empowerment. For instance, SPQEM’s emphasis on “quality education” critiques madrasas’ traditional curricula as deficient, echoing colonial biases and ignoring their role in serving marginalized communities. Recent debates, such as those on the Waqf Bill and UP ban, highlight politicization, where madrasas are discursively linked to “radicalism” or “non-compliance” fuelling minority anxieties and protests. This reflects a neoliberal shift, prioritizing employability over cultural autonomy, as seen in dropout rates and menial job migrations.

Limitations include reliance on secondary sources (majorly) and digitized archives, potentially overlooking nuanced multilingual debates (e.g., Urdu in madrasas). Access constraints to full parliamentary transcripts and biases in scholarly interpretations (e.g., overemphasis on decline) may skew analysis. Future research could employ primary archival dives, comparative studies with other minority educations (e.g., gurukuls), or ethnographic insights into madrasa stakeholders to explore resistance and agency.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has traced the evolution of parliamentary debates on madrasa education in British and independent India, revealing the changing discourse and policy that have shaped perceptions of madrasas throughout times and spaces. The analysis demonstrates a transition from colonial pragmatism, where madrasas were initially supported for administrative purposes but later marginalized through orientalist rhetoric, to post-colonial efforts at integration and modernization, which often perpetuate stereotypes under the guise of reform. Key findings show that colonial debates used words like "antiquated" and "fanatic" to justify less funding and Anglicisation, which made it harder for Muslims to get an education. Post-independence, Indian parliamentary discussions reframed madrasas within the framework of minority rights under Article 30, yet modernization schemes like SPQEM and recent legal challenges, such as the 2024 Allahabad High Court ruling, reflect tensions between cultural autonomy and state-driven secularisation.

The main value of this research is its long-term study of how language in parliamentary debates from colonial times to now shows and maintains power differences, which continues to create educational inequalities for Muslims. By applying postcolonial theory and critical discourse analysis, the study challenges simplistic narratives of madrasas as merely “backwards”, highlighting their role in serving marginalized communities and preserving cultural identity within constraints of recognition and resources. Practically, it underscores the need for inclusive policies that balance modernization with respect for religious autonomy, as exemplified by successful models like Tata Trust’s Madrasa Improvement Programme. Theoretically, it enriches global discussions on religious education in secular states, offering insights into managing pluralism in diverse democracies.

Policy recommendations include increased funding for modernization without coercive secularization, teacher training to integrate modern subjects, and stakeholder consultations to ensure reforms align with community needs. For instance, expanding schemes like SPQEM with transparent implementation could address the 9.39% madrasa attendance rate among Muslim children, many from low-income backgrounds. Additionally, revising the Waqf (Amendment) Bill to reduce state oversight and protect madrasa autonomy could mitigate perceptions of cultural erosion. Another aspect of reforms encompasses recognition of madrasa teachers (at least those government-aided or recognised under State Madrasa Boards) within the ambit of relevant labour laws to ensure fair and dignified working remunerations. Future research should explore archival records, particularly multilingual debates, and conduct ethnographic studies with madrasa educators and students to capture agency and resistance. Comparative analyses with other minority education systems, such as Sikh or Hindu institutions, could further contextualize these dynamics. This paper emphasises the intricate interaction of history, policy, and discourse in influencing madrasa education, promoting sophisticated reforms that respect India's pluralistic values while tackling educational disparities for its Muslim community.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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