

4-1-2012

Arshad Alam. Inside a madrasa. Knowledge, power and Islamic identity in India. New Delhi: Routledge. 2011.

Shirin Jahangir

Independent Scholar, Shirin.jahangir@ka.com.tr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jahangir, Shirin (2012) "Arshad Alam. Inside a madrasa. Knowledge, power and Islamic identity in India. New Delhi: Routledge. 2011.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 3 : No. 2 , Article 7. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol3/iss2/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

**Arshad Alam. *Inside a madrasa. Knowledge, power and Islamic identity in India.*
New Delhi: Routledge. 2011.**

Arshad Alam's *Inside a Madrasa. Knowledge, Power and Islamic Identity in India* offers a timely and valuable analysis of the role and function of the madrasa in northern India, as the book challenges not only the stereotypical image of a madrasa as a center for the spawning of violence and terrorism in the name of Islam but also the scholarly tendency to overlook modern day madrasas as educational institutions.

This work is a welcome addition to the existing research done on madrasas in India, which includes Barbara Metcalf's pioneering work on Deoband, Yoginder Sikand's more general study on madrasas in India, and Mareike Jule Winkelmann's work on Girls' Madrasas in India, among others. The book is made up of seven chapters, which can be divided into two different but inter-related sections: Chapters two through four consist of a direct discussion of how Madrasa Ashrafiya, located in Mubarakpur, in eastern Uttar Pradesh province, has changed both functionally and structurally over the years since its foundation, as well as how Madrasa Ashrafiya compares to other madrasas. Chapters five through seven, by contrast, focus more on the students themselves, including reasons why parents send their children to these schools, the effects of madrasa pedagogy on students, and how the students learn to adjust to the madrasa environment and discipline, as well as how the students are taught respect for authority, and so forth.

One of the book's main themes, and perhaps the book's main value, is that it defines the madrasa as an educational institution rather than as a religious center. It must also be pointed out that in this way, Alam departs from earlier studies that have looked at madrasas in the context of their history alone. He situates his study within the larger theoretical debates on pedagogy and transmission of knowledge by focusing upon the writings and theories of Durkheim and Bourdieu, among others, as well as discussing life at the schools; the development and changes in the curriculum over the years; the madrasas' use of authority, discipline, and corporal punishment; and its demands on the children/students in order to position the madrasa as an educational institution. Also, by detailing the socio-historical basis of their establishment and the politics surrounding them, attention is drawn to the need to understand that madrasas are "much more than just religious institutions"; madrasas are also centers in which Islamic identity is constructed, (and as such, are not entirely free of rhetoric), as "education and more so religious education is hardly a neutral enterprise." In the book, Alam emphasizes the fact that madrasas should be seen as educational institutions. But he also wants to make it very clear that like all educational institutions, religious education is not necessarily neutral.

It is precisely this construction of Islamic identity that the Hindu media is quick to distort, and a second major theme of the book (hinted at in its title) is an exploration of the ways in which the madrasa both affects and constructs Islamic identity. Throughout the book, Alam repeatedly stresses the fact that the madrasa is not just a Muslim institution for learning, however; it is indeed a place where Islamic identities are formed. Madrasa Ashrafiya, the madrasa that Alam analyzes and discusses in detail in the book, is one of the biggest madrasas for Barelwis in north India. It defines and develops itself in relation to and in competition with other Muslim institutions, namely the madrasa in Deoband. It is also a center in a "lower caste Muslim qasba," catering largely to the Ansaris of this qasba. One specific chapter is devoted to the issue of the construction of identity around denomination or *maslak*. The Ashrafiya madrasa, like any other madrasa, symbolizes the culmination of denominational (*maslaki*) solidarity and, in turn, strives to consolidate the *maslaki* community. In classrooms, the students practice the Barelwi ideology through texts suggested in the curriculum; outside, they

consume popular books from Ashrafiya alumni and practice oratory through debating societies, among other activities used as modes of articulating and internalizing the maslak-based ideology.

Alam draws considerable attention to the fact that while the construction and internalization of Barelwi identity at Ashrafia often defines the “correct” Muslim identity as being in competition with or in opposition to other maslaki identities among the Muslims in India, it does not, as the media purports, explicitly encourage violence. It is through this means that Alam most directly counters the media, and, especially in India, the Hindu view that madrasas act as centers teaching violence and hatred toward other religions. In a chapter entitled “The Enemy Within,” Alam reveals that through the focus on maslaki identity, the enemy or “other” for a madrasa student is not a Hindu, but a Muslim from another denomination (maslak) (p.182). While this revelation is worrisome in itself, it goes a long way in addressing the vast misperception that madrasas are simply centers for breeding violence and terrorism. For this reason, Arshad Alam’s scholarly and interesting book is a most valuable contribution.

Shirin Jahangir
Independent Scholar
Shirin.jahangir@ka.com.tr