

# ECHOES OF WISDOM:

## Tracing the Intellectual Heritage of Old Delhi's Madrasas

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What do you envision when you think of old Delhi, before the British East India Company besieged it in 1857? When I imagine Delhi, I picture women draped in ghararas, cotton sarees, and banarasi sarees, and peshwazes adorned with ornate gemstones, running around the forts and along the watercourses. Durbars echoing the sounds of mushairas, madrasas filled with intellectuals, discussing logic, theology, philosophy and rhetoric. The aroma of freshly cooked food wafts through the air, tempting passersby to indulge in the local concoction of cuisines – puris, kachauris, juchais; rice, vegetables, pulses, sweets, fresh and dry fruit.

In the words of Ghalib,

*Ik roz apni rooh se poocha, ki dilli kya hai,  
to yun jawab main keh gaye, yeh duniya mano  
jism hai aur dilli uski jaan.*

*I asked my soul, "What is Delhi?"  
It replied: "The world is the body and Delhi its soul."*

For over a millennium, Delhi has held prominence as a major city, serving as a hub of power for diverse rulers, including Rajput clans, early Sultans, Mughal emperors, British administrators since the mid-19th century, and India's federal government since its independence in 1947. The British response to the revolt (1857) resulted in the removal and imprisonment of Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II, the transformation of the Jama Masjid and the Red Fort into military barracks, and the mass exodus of Muslims from the city. In his work 'Dastambu,' a journal chronicling the events during the revolt, Ghalib depicts the turmoil and confusion that unfolded around him.

"The city has become a desert... by God, Delhi is no more a city, but a camp, a cantonment... No fort, no city, no bazaars, no watercourses... Four things kept Delhi alive – the fort, the daily crowds at the Jama Masjid, the weekly walk to the Yamuna Bridge, and the yearly fair of the flower-sellers. None of these survives, so how could Delhi survive? Yes, there used to be a city of this name in the land of Hindustan."<sup>1</sup>

The educational standards in the madrasas of that era were of such high calibre that they drew considerable admiration from European observers. William Fraser (1784-1835), who served as the British Resident and Commissioner of Delhi during the reign of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar II, exemplifies this profound respect for the madrasas' learning. He became a student of Shah Abdul Aziz at Madrasa Rahimiyah, which belonged to the prestigious Waliullah family, illustrating the considerable intellectual influence these institutions commanded.

<sup>1</sup>Ralph Russell, *The Oxford Ghalib: Life, Letters and Ghazals*, New Delhi, 2003, pp.166, 188

William Sleeman, best known for his role in suppressing the thugs and for his sharp criticism of the Indian judicial system, couldn't help but acknowledge the extraordinary quality of madrasa education in Delhi: "Perhaps there are few communities in the world among whom education is more generally diffused than among Muhammadans [Muslims] in India," he wrote on a visit to the Mughal capital. "He who holds an office worth twenty rupees a month commonly gives his sons an education equal to that of a prime minister. They learn, through the medium of Arabic and Persian languages, what young men in our colleges learn through those of Greek and Latin – that is grammar, rhetoric, and logic. After his seven years of study, the young Muhammadan binds his turban upon a head almost as well filled with the things which appertain to these branches of knowledge as the young man raw from Oxford: he will talk as fluently about Socrates and Aristotle, Plato and Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna; (alias Sokrat, Aristotalis, Alflatun, Bokrat, Jalinus and Bu Ali Sena); and, what is much to his advantage in India, the languages in which he has learnt what he knows are those which he most requires through life."<sup>2</sup>

The reputation of Delhi's madrasas was compelling enough to motivate the young poet Altaf Husain Hali to escape his marriage in Panipat and traverse the 53 miles to Delhi, all by himself, without money, and sleeping outdoors, in an effort to fulfill his dream of studying at the celebrated colleges there. "Everyone wanted me to look for a job," he wrote later, "but my passion for learning prevailed."<sup>3</sup> Delhi was a prominent intellectual hub, particularly in the early 1850s, when its cultural vibrancy was at its peak. The city was home to six renowned madrasas and at least four smaller ones, along with nine newspapers in Urdu and Persian, five scholarly journals from Delhi College, countless printing presses and publishers, and over 130 Yunani doctors. It was also the site where many recent Western scientific discoveries were translated into Arabic and Persian for the first time. The intellectual climate in the various colleges and madrasas was charged with open-mindedness and enthusiasm. However, the most significant attraction of all was the presence of poets and intellectuals like Ghalib, Zauq, Sahbai, and Azurda.

Before writing this article, I asked my classmates and British colleagues what they think of when they hear the word 'madrasa'. The majority associated it with an extremist school that teaches students jihadist ideology. In the post-Cold War era, and particularly after 9/11, madrasas have been subject to significant misconceptions, often fuelled by Western media and even Pakistani media. These portrayals lack nuance and ignore the historical context of traditional madrasas, which had unique structures and curricula, distinct from the modern madrasas funded by the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Today's madrasas are a colonial legacy that were later shaped by U.S. interventionist policies in our region, resulting in madrasa graduates who are labour market mismatches, as noted by many Pakistani scholars.

It would be unfair to label mediaeval madrasas as solely theological institutions, as the rational sciences were part of their curricula. They produced jurists, mathematicians, physicians, astronomers, theologians, and other professionals who went on to manage the state apparatus.

It is crucial to differentiate between mediaeval madrasas and pre-colonial madrasas, as the latter were influenced in part by the colonial dichotomy of public versus private spheres. It's disheartening to realise that an advanced madrasa culture was systematically dismantled, with the remaining vestiges relentlessly eradicated. A significant number of Europeans assimilated into Indo-Islamic culture weaving themselves into its fabric through marriage, establishing homes, and gaining fluency in the language and literature. Some even pursued a deeper understanding of classical Islamic sciences by studying in the madrasas.

One could ask, what rendered this educational approach so distinctive that a British officer was left in awe while witnessing a madrasa graduation during the British Raj, even going so far as to compare a madrasa's curriculum to Oxbridge education. Is it possible to reimagine the current madrasa curriculum from scratch, reviving the one that used to train graduates to excel in Aristotelian logic, Persian and classical Arabic grammar, aythamian optics, or the poetic use of metonymy, metaphor, and synecdoche?

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<sup>2</sup>W. H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, Oxford, 1915, pp. 523-4

<sup>3</sup>Hali, *Kulliyat-e.Nasir*, vol. I, p.344, cited in Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, p.14.

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