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## Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers. Madrasas and Islamic Education in India*

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**Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers. Madrasas and Islamic Education in India*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2005, 358 pages.**

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[1] This is a very different book from Sikand's first book by Penguin (*Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India*). In that book, he described a variety of what he calls 'liminal' religious traditions in different parts of India, traditions that cross boundaries between 'Hindus', 'Muslims' and 'Christians', among others. The quotation marks are his, to make the basic point that these are historical constructions, not self-evident, well-defined terms. The book reads like a delightful travelogue, for each of the groups he describes are people he met in his travels through the country. However, it has a serious purpose, namely, to bring to light the variety of ways in which religious traditions are shared at the local level, contrary to the picture most of us have of water-tight, rigidly distinct, and often hostile religions in India. Such shared religious traditions, Sikand writes, 'point to ways in which people and groups can come to terms with multiple identities ... [and they] represent a sharp critique of established religions, their hierarchies and orthodoxies, and could be called nascent liberation theologies' (p. 19). Sikand believes it is important to explore these bridge-building religious traditions in the interest of promoting greater religious harmony in the world we live in.

[2] *Bastions of the Believers*, while very different at one level (its subject-matter, on which more presently), is animated by the same activist concern to promote understanding and thereby greater cooperation between religious actors in India. Sikand's own interest in Islam began in a very personal way, through his extended visits to a Sufi shrine in Delhi, gradual knowledge of Urdu, and conversations with Muslims in different settings. He later followed this up by doing a doctorate in Islamic Studies in Britain. Given the climate of strident Hindu nationalism ('Hindutva') and the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in India since the 1990s - thus preceding the events of September 11- Sikand's exploration of Indian madrasas in this book seeks to counter media

accounts of madrasas as 'dens of terror' while also filling a gap in the academic knowledge of Indian madrasas since independence.

[3] The book proceeds chronologically over six chapters, starting with the basic concept of *ilm* (knowledge) in early Islamic history and highlighting the importance placed on the acquisition of knowledge in both the Qur'an and *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet). Sikand points out that the Qur'an mentions the importance of acquiring knowledge thrice as often as it mentions the importance of offering one's prayers (p. 3). Because early Islamic thought placed such an emphasis on education, Islamic centers of learning, and the madrasa in particular, arose in many parts of the Islamic world, especially Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid empire (but also Cairo, center of Fatimid rule), and contributed to the transmission of knowledge from the Greeks to Europe through works of translation, among other things.

[4] Turning to the Indian subcontinent, the focus of this book, Sikand makes an important point when he writes that the early Muslims made no distinction between the religious and the secular - this was a concept introduced by the British during colonial rule. Muslim scholars (*ulama*) in India distinguished between the 'transmitted' and 'rational' sciences, the former corresponding to Qur'anic commentary, the science of *hadith*, and *fiqh*, while the latter referred to disciplines such as Arabic grammar, poetry, philosophy, medicine, and the like (p. 30). Both types of knowledge were valued and taught at the madrasa and were a source of upward mobility, prestige, and employment.

[5] But beginning in 1772 - when under Warren Hastings the East India Company codified Muslim law at the same time as it was dispensing with the services of *qazis* and *muftis* in the courts - and continuing through the nineteenth century, the role of the *ulama* was increasingly confined to the realm of personal law. In 1844, madrasa graduates were barred from government employment (p. 65). With the introduction of English-medium schools in the nineteenth century, education in British India came to be characterized by 'dualism', with English-medium education being the avenue to government employment and upward mobility (and catering to the well-born or *ashraf*), while the madrasas, which catered to the lower classes or *ajlaf*, lagged behind. The confinement of the *ulama* to that which was 'religious' led to a reification of 'Islam' and 'Islamic' knowledge itself. This was reflected in the increasing limitations of the madrasa syllabus, with medieval texts of *fiqh* from the Hanafi school constituting its core and the rational sciences (particularly philosophy) being downgraded or omitted altogether. The *ulama* became, in

Sikand's view, increasingly bogged down in the minutiae of ritual rules and correspondingly cut off from the outside world.

[6] A related development during the colonial period, chronicled in a number of studies of the north Indian Sunni *'ulama*, was their internal division into what are today called *maslaks* or schools of thought, each of which saw itself as reformist but defined the task of reform differently. Many of these movements were centered around madrasas, foremost among them the Dar al-'Ulum at Deoband. Since the late nineteenth century, there have been frequent attempts at educational reform, with various combinations of 'religious' and 'secular' subjects being proposed by the different *maslaks* (Deobandis, Ahl-I Hadith, Barelwis, Nadwis, and others), as well as the more modernist Aligarh Muslim Anglo-Oriental College, which later became Aligarh Muslim University. The Jama'at-i Islami, which is an 'Islamist' movement, as distinguished from what Sikand calls the 'traditionalist *'ulama*', is very important in its own right in the educational field. Its madrasa, Jami'at ul-Falah, near Azamgarh, east U.P., has been in the forefront of educational reform, as Sikand describes in chapter 5.

[7] Sikand's greatest contribution in this book are the chapters on independent India, and his description of the debates that have been and are still taking place today about the direction of reform needed. The shortcomings of an Indian madrasa education are many: lack of centralization, with each madrasa adopting its own version of the traditional *dars-i nizami* syllabus (which was created in the eighteenth century to train government officials); use of medieval *fiqh* texts which do not have any bearing on the issues facing Indian Muslims today; an overemphasis on *ikhtilafiyat* or disputation with other Sunni reform groups; a lack of books on modern subjects, and in some cases active discouragement by teachers of students reading newspapers and watching television for fear that this would weaken their faith (p. 106); and so on.

[8] But the voices of reform are numerous as well, and Sikand traveled widely throughout India to find them and hear what they have to say. They include Maulana Zain ul-Sajid bin Qasmi, a Deobandi scholar who now teaches at AMU, and who advocates the inclusion of 'modern' subjects in the curriculum (p. 150); Waris Mazhari, the editor of an Urdu monthly magazine, *Tarjuman-i Dar ul-'Ulum*, who is a passionate advocate for change on many fronts, including curricular reform, vocational training, and girls' education (p. 155); Mohammad Aslam Parvaiz, editor of *Science*, the only Urdu-language science magazine in India, who wants science to be included in the curriculum (p. 162); Asghar Ali Engineer, director of the Institute of Islamic Studies

in Mumbai, who wants a thorough revision of the syllabus; Maqbool Ahmad Siraj, editor of *Islamic Voice*, an English-language monthly in Bangalore, and many others.

[9] Many of these reformers would like to frame the debate in terms of 'useful' versus 'harmful' knowledge: by 'useful', they mean 'all knowledge that leads to piety as well as worldly and social welfare', in contradistinction to 'harmful' knowledge, which leads to irreligious and immoral behavior (p. 161). More generally, the underlying issues that they are grappling with have to do with 'concern for shoring up the authority of the *`ulama* and improving the economic conditions of madrasa students [and] the question of the empowerment of the Muslim community under the leadership of the *`ulama*.

[10] Modernization is sometimes presented, by both Islamists as well as by many traditional *`ulama*, as linked to the quest for political empowerment' (p. 168). As Sikand points out, many of the reformers (though not all) have a defensive attitude to change, and are responding in a spirit of duress and of being under siege.

[11] However, Sikand also describes a remarkable success story in terms of madrasa reform in Kerala which is not a bit defensive. Kerala's Muslim population accounts for a quarter of the state's overall population. In this sense, the state is multireligious and multiethnic, like the rest of the country. As is well known, Kerala has one of the highest literacy rates in the country, at over 90 percent. Kerala's madrasas offer Arabic language education of a high caliber, which has opened up jobs for graduates as translators and office work in Arab countries. The major catalyst for change since the 1950s has been the Mujahid movement, whose worldview is similar to that of the Ahl-i Hadith, who believe that Muslims should act in accordance with the Qur'an and prophetic example (*sunna*) as recorded in *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet). Unlike the other *`ulama* groups, the Ahl-i Hadith reject the authority of the four major Sunni schools of law - a position strongly disputed by all the major Sunni reformist movements. The Mujahid movement runs 'scores of madrasas, schools and colleges in the state, in addition to a number of social work centres' (p. 131). The Mujahids emphasize women's education (in several Mujahid madrasas, girls outnumber boys), social work as part of the curriculum, religious inclusion (non-Muslim students are among its student body), and interfaith dialogue, in an effort to promote intercommunity harmony. Its graduates and supporters include educational professionals and businessmen.

[12] On the issue of madrasas and politics more generally, Sikand ends the book with a long chapter on Islamic militancy and its connection with madrasas. This subject has been in the forefront of media debate ever since the events of September 11, and even before, as I mentioned at the outset. Sikand points out forcefully that Indian madrasas have no connection with Islamic militancy. In fact, it is the Hindu nationalists who have been engaging in political militancy: 'It is a sign of the extremely loaded discourse on nationalism in India today that while madrasas, the vast majority of which have nothing whatsoever to do with militant activism, are routinely described as 'dens of terror', schools and organizations run by Hindutva groups are generally seen as proudly 'nationalist', and as defending the honour of the country that is under constant threat from 'enemies' within and without' (p. 227).

[13] In the wake of renewed Hindu-Muslim attacks such as those in Gujarat in 2002, a number of madrasas have begun to register themselves with their state governments to prevent harassment by the state authorities. They have also been at pains to open their doors to outsiders to demonstrate their bona fides, and frequently invite state officials to public events on Independence Day, Republic Day, and the like. Sikand sees an opportunity here for greater dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between state agencies and madrasas for building bridges of understanding and trust, and warns that continued demonization of the madrasas will force them to retreat behind closed doors and stop the process of reform, which has been slow and halting at best. The book thus ends by sounding a theme close to Sikand's heart, namely, the need for intercommunity understanding and harmony.

[14] It is customary to end a book review - even one which is highly appreciative of the book at hand, as is this one - with a few caveats or critical observations on the part of the reviewer. In this spirit, I offer the following comments. As one who has studied the *`ulama* myself (the Barelwis), I have learned to appreciate the tradition of *fiqh* scholarship, which is their hallmark, on its own merits. It would have enhanced the book, I feel, if Sikand had shown more appreciation for this tradition, antiquated and outmoded as it appears to be, without constantly running it down. In its defense, I would argue that those who do not value this tradition--with all its limitations, which I acknowledge, given the times we live in--often end up becoming self-taught (and rather arrogant) masters of the Islamic tradition. It is not a simple question of just picking up the Qur'an and reading it from cover to cover to find out what it has to say about this or that subject, as many people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, seem to believe. The Islamic scholastic tradition is valuable in and of itself, regardless of its 'market value', or ability to generate jobs for

its specialists. Thus, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, in his recent book about the *`ulama* (*The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*), talks at length about the importance of the commentaries (*shuruh*) which have been a discursive tradition for the South Asian *`ulama* (indeed, for *`ulama* throughout the Islamic world) for centuries.

[15] In the same spirit, I believe Sikand tends to overuse such labels as 'traditional', 'traditionalist', or 'conservative' to describe the *`ulama*. Since Sikand hates labels of all kinds, he might have been a little more sensitive on this point. In many parts of the book, such labels could have easily been deleted without any lack of clarity resulting. In fact, it would have enhanced the discussion. Many so-called 'traditionalists', after all, are also reformers, as Sikand himself so ably demonstrates.

[16] Moreover, the Barelwis seemed to get short shrift, and to be presented in a rather monolithic way as unreformed conservatives and uniformly in favor of partition (unlike the Deobandis, who are said to have unambiguously favored Indian nationalism), though the reality was more complex - and messy - than that.

[17] And in the section on independent India, there could have been a more extended discussion about the relationship between the Indian government's desire to control madrasa education and other issues of vital importance such as debates about the continued applicability of Islamic personal law for Indian Muslims versus the imposition of a uniform civil law on all Indian citizens (a debate that consumed public attention in the 1980s as a result of the Shah Bano case), and steps by the Indian government to impose some control over mosques, as is the case in countries like Egypt, for example. Although this may be too sensitive an issue in India, a discussion about it would have been illuminating.

[18] So much for the caveats. This is a splendid book, and should be high on the reading list of all those interested in India, Hindu-Muslim relations, and education reform.