Religion and Development
Seminar
The State-Madrasa Relationship and Madrasa Reforms
September 13, 2008, Lucknow

A one day seminar was held in Lucknow on September 13, 2008, to share and discuss the findings of the country report on the relationship between the State and madrasas in India, to compare this with experience in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and to consider the implications for the madrasa modernization programme in India. 28 participants from government and representatives of madrasas, religious leaders, researchers, scholars and the NGO sector from Delhi, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh took part in the discussions.

The seminar began with an overview of the Religion and Development research programme by Prof. Richard Batley, University of Birmingham. Prof Batley presented the remit of the research programme as being to enable improved understanding of relationships between religion and development and to facilitate a dialogue between various types of development partners. Prof. Surinder Jodhka, IIDS, who is the Country Coordinator of the RaD research programme in India, then described the purpose and agenda of the research in India. He pointed out that it added a new dimension to research in India, which had not given much consideration to religion as a factor in development.

The key paper, based on the study in India, was presented by Padmaja Nair. It focused on the multiple dimensions of the state’s engagement with madrasas, with special reference to the context of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal against the backdrop of a reform or modernization process. Nair concluded the presentation with the key finding that the State- madrasa relationship in India was influenced by three key factors: the state’s constitutional obligations to minority communities, varying ideologies of political parties in a multi-party system, and the need of madrasas to survive while retaining elements of Islamic education. This was followed by presentations by the representative of Madrasa Shiksha Parishad in Uttar Pradesh and the President of the West Bengal Board of Madrasa Education. Both the presentations described the key features of the state supported modernization process and envisaged outcome in the respective states. The last presentation, by Prof. Batley, of two parallel studies conducted in Pakistan and Bangladesh by Dr. Masooda Bano, of the University of Oxford, brought out the differences and dynamics of the relationship in the two countries. This focused on the fact that while reforms had had a high level of acceptance in Bangladesh, in Pakistan they had been boycotted by a significant proportion of the madrasas. An essential element was the establishment of trust between the state and madrasas.
The discussion sessions that followed the presentations were largely centered on a critique of the modernization programme initiated by the Indian state. The arguments included concerns over the unhelpful approach of the government institutions and officials in-charge of the efforts and an apparent tendency to view these essentially religious institutions as simply a part of the ‘school’ system. In summing up the discussions, Prof Jodhka noted that the state-madrasa relationship had changed over time, and that it was dynamic and context specific. The status of Muslims in India was lower than that of the schedule castes and there was a perception within the Muslim community that the state was not only ignoring it but that systematic discrimination existed. However, at the same time there had been a growing process of democratization of society, as was evident from the fact that the Sachhar Committee Report was not only widely shared but also and taken seriously.

The leading policy issues raised in discussion were

- The need to recognize religion as a critical variable in development.
- The fact that global political and social development processes have brought religion into the discourse on development. For instance, in the Indian sub-continent any discourse on education also now tends to include consideration of the role of madrasas and maktabs. Research needs to contribute to the development of policy by creating an understanding of the State-madrasa relationship and by examining the internal systems of madrasa education including curriculums, teaching methods, text-books, and mainstreaming into regular education.
- The need to ensure that policies are responsive to the livelihood concerns of poor students in the madrasa system.