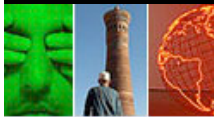


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Interview with Shaheen Dill-Riaz
Isolation as Driving Force behind Extremism

What happens behind closed doors at Islamic schools? Filmmaker Shaheen Dill-Riaz looks for answers to this question in Bangladesh in his new film, "Korankinder". Eren Güvercin spoke with the filmmaker

Mr. Dill-Riaz, your new documentary, "Korankinder", has just been released. What inspired you to make a film about madrassas, the Islamic schools in Bangladesh?



In his new documentary, Bangladesh-born director Shaheen Dill-Riaz looks behind the scenes at Islamic schools in his country

Shaheen Dill-Riaz: The film isn't just about Islamic schools. I try in each of my films to discover a world where I have never been before and where I can take European audiences along with me on the adventure. That's how I came up with the idea of Islamic schools, because it also has something to do with the present situation in Bangladesh.

You frequently hear that there are more and more Islamic schools there. And very often people also accuse these Islamic schools, although they don't have direct ties with extremists, of being politically active, something I was unable to prove in my film. I was interested above all in what madrassas actually are and what kind of standing they have in Bangladesh.

Islamic schools are regarded as very close-doored. How did you manage to obtain permission to shoot a film? How were you able to gain the trust of the people in charge?

Dill-Riaz: It was very difficult. In the beginning the schools completely refused to allow any filming to take place. Some of them said that this was not possible due to Islam's prohibition of imagery. I tried to contact several Islamic schools and make use of my personal connections.

This prompted an interesting discussion between the various schools because they actually started to fight about this issue. One group was against the film, while the others said that it was important to open the doors, because other journalists would write whatever they wanted to and people would think there was really something to hide. In the end a few schools gave me permission to shoot.

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Shot with a shaky handheld camera, Shaheen's film "Korankinder" shows how schoolchildren from poor backgrounds learn Koran verses by heart twelve hours a day for two years

Were there any problems during the shooting, any efforts at manipulation? Were you able to move about freely?

Dill-Riaz: I was fairly free to move around as I chose. I had the impression that the people had no idea what journalists can actually do with a camera and what they can create out of the pictures they record.

What were some of the reactions of the people in the madrassas?

Dill-Riaz: It was interesting to see that people immediately tried to defend themselves in all the schools even before I asked any questions about extremism. There were the usual answers, that they did not want anything to do with extremists as their faith forbid it. I did not use these comments because it is simply not the theme of the film.

During the shooting people at the schools were very friendly and helpful. They were delighted that a camera team would want to spend so much time there. Most journalists up until then had only come for one day, and they all wanted to talk about the accusation that Koran schools were involved in training terrorists. The schools were surprised that I didn't even broach that issue. I wanted to do something completely different. I wanted to observe and to find out more about these people, about their traditions.

The Koran schools have acquired a bad reputation, especially in recent times. What was your impression? Do these madrassas really represent a threat?

Dill-Riaz: There are many generalisations, that Islamic schools are instrumentalised for political ends, that radical groups use them for their own purposes. That is also true in part. But that's not what my film is about. I wanted first of all to get to know the Koran schools and to gain a deeper insight into what goes on there. Where do the madrassas come from? What do they have to do with our history on the Indian subcontinent? What role do they play today in Bangladeshi society?



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Europa Jaratouna



The hard school of the Koran: "The children usually have to get up at four-thirty in the morning, and instruction goes on until ten o'clock at night", reports Dill-Riaz

Koran schools look back on a very long history. Such schools already existed in the 12th century on the Indian subcontinent. There also used to be the so-called "Tol", elementary schools founded by Hindus. And then there were the "madrassas", which literally means "place of instruction". These two types of educational institution were extremely widespread on the Indian subcontinent.

During the colonial era the English tried to establish reformed Koran school models. They needed them for a practical reason: many texts and the tax system were in

Persian and only Muslims could speak that language, not Hindus. The Hindus integrated themselves much more rapidly into the colonial structure. They quickly learned English and they sent their children to the missionary schools run by the English. The Muslims by contrast isolated themselves, because they were disenfranchised.

The madrassas that were newly founded through the colonial power, the so-called "Aliya" madrassas or high madrassas, served to educate Persian-speaking civil servants so that Muslims could also later be integrated into the administrative apparatus and the English would have access to their language. As a reaction, the Muslims in Bangladesh established their own so-called "Qawmi", or people's madrassas, in an effort to provide an alternative to the British educational system.

The "Qawmi" madrassas are still today the dominant tradition throughout the subcontinent. They are largely insulated from any State influence. In colonial times the English already left the "Qawmi" madrassas alone to do as they pleased. They have never been subject to any controls. The government of Bangladesh still has no control mechanisms with which to register these schools.

What is everyday life like for the children at these Koran schools?

Dill-Riaz: The children usually have to get up at four-thirty in the morning, and instruction then goes on until ten o'clock at night – with two or three breaks. This is a very intensive kind of learning because the children have to memorise everything. They even sleep in the classroom.

In Europe, too, there is much discussion about Koran schools set up in the back courtyards of mosques. Fears are voiced that these schools exert an ideological influence on Muslim youth and introduce them to radical ideas. What do you think of such viewpoints? Do these schools really pose this kind of threat?

Dill-Riaz: A threat only arises when we force people to isolate



Europa Jaratouna is a trilingual multimedia communication project that publishes reports and information on Europe and Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestinian Territories, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria. [More...](#)

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themselves. This is the case for many ethnic and religious minorities. I think this is a serious issue. I don't know to what extent such influence exists in Europe, but I can imagine that tradition-minded Muslims would tend to be in favour of their children learning the Koran by heart.

Such an extreme religious practice always comes about when the observance of religion disappears from our everyday lives. If the thousand-year-old traditions associated with this religion are lost, people will want to retrieve them somehow. This serves as compensation for a situation in which people are not allowed to really live out their religion in their daily lives.

What role is played by Saudi Arabia, which has built and finances Koran schools in many areas of the world, in the spreading of Wahabism in countries such as Bangladesh or India? Do the Saudi Wahabis have much influence there?

Dill-Riaz: I believe there are many madrassas that are financed by Saudi Arabia. People suspect that the Wahabist interpretation of Islam is preached there. You hear rumours that madrasa teachers from Saudi Arabia are flown into these countries.

I think it's a shame that something like this is not monitored. It's up to the State to keep watch over what is taught at educational institutions. But this unfortunately doesn't happen. Naturally, we shouldn't object to Saudi Arabia supporting a good-quality basic education – as long as the country doesn't propagate any kind of orthodox curriculum purporting to teach Muslims how to live by their religion.

Interview: Eren Güvercin

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"Korankinder" (Children of the Koran), (Bangladesh/Germany 2008), Director: Shaheen Dill-Riaz, Cast: Mohammed Ismael, Kamrul Hassan, Rayhan Hossain, Prof. Salimullah Khan, Sharfuddin

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The School of the Taliban Presents Itself as Apolitical

The Darul Uloom in north Indian Deoband is the most important Islamic seminary in Asia. Even the Afghan Taliban ascribe to the interpretation of Islam taught here. Since the terrorist attacks of 2001, the school has been under tightened observation. By Ulrich Schwerin, Deoband

Interview with Maulana Kalbe Sadiq

"Education Is the Most Crucial Challenge for India's Muslims"

Maulana Kalbe Sadiq is one of India's leading Shia Muslim scholars. In this interview with Yoginder Sikand, he talks about educational concepts of Indian Muslim scholars and their widespread reluctance to face Muslims' contemporary

challenges

The "Iron Eaters" of Bangladesh

Cruel Logic of Exploitation

The documentary "Iron Eaters" presents the tough reality of the ship-breaking industry in Bangladesh. Sonja Ernst had a look at Shaheen Dill-Riaz's award-winning film

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