

# A Brief Survey of Muslim Education in Pre-Colonial India (1206-1857)

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Education is a process of reconstruction of mind. It is a very important aspect of human life. Muslims in pre-colonial India were strongly believed on two different types of education; contemporary and religious. **Methodology:** Contemporary education was considered necessary for day to day dwelling of a person while on other hand for every Muslim religious education was considered mandatory for spiritually svelte life here in this world and hereafter. Like other religions Islam also laid stress on importance of education. **Results:** The evolution of Muslim education system in pre-colonial India was strongly conforming with Muslim tradition. The number of 'Madrassahs' continuously increased during Muslim rule in India. Muslim rulers were always interested to provide education to all irrespective of class. Traditional and religious education was popular among Muslims but rational discourses (Modern Sciences) were absent in curriculum. **Conclusion:** This paper is basically a brief survey of Muslim education in pre-colonial India which will provide a snapshot of education system and government policies during Muslim rule in India.

## 1. Introduction

Education is not the filling of vessel; it is the kindling of flame (Tiwari, 2007). In pre-colonial India, Muslim education system was evolved through an evolutionary process. It was strongly in compliance with Muslim tradition and the needs of society. No centralized education system was observed during sultanate period but rulers of Delhi Sultanate always provide royal patronage to educational institutes (Madrassahs). According to Ibn-e-Battuta there were thousand 'Madrassahs' in Delhi during 13th century (citation needed). The Great Mughals were established a separate department to support educational institutions and successfully introduced a strong educational policy. No doubt all Muslim rulers had deep concerns with education because of its key importance in the Islamic teachings.

## 2. Materials and methods

### *2.1 Education in Early Muslim Society*

Islam laid stress on knowledge seeking and it was obligatory for every Muslim to acquire knowledge. In Muslim history there were many scholars who dedicated themselves for learning and teaching. In Muslim community, it was always considered a sacred act to facilitate teachers or religious scholars. It was a norm that knowledge seekers travel from city to city for their learning from renowned scholars. During their stay in a city, they were used to teach the Holy Quran, Quranic Commentary and Sayings of Prophet to others. Commonly rich people of the area took care of such teachers and considered this act as an honor for them (Gilani, 2001). In Muslim culture, a teacher was always considered as a blessed one and in society the respect of teacher was very high. Education was not institutionalized at that time. It was common that students move towards another teacher for higher order of learning after completing their particular learning from one teacher. At start any formal or institutional system of education in Muslim society was nonexistent but with the passage of time tradition of learning gradually became strong.

### *2.2 Muslim Education in Sub-Continent*

In 13th century Muslims came to Sub-Continent with candid and well settled traditions of learning. During early Muslim Rule in India Muslim education system gradually became formal. It was divided in two folds; Maktab and Madrassah. In Maktab, children commonly learn the recitation of the Holy

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Quran. A Maktab was like a primary school which had only one teacher. Maktabas were commonly established in mosques where prayer leader (Maulvi) also served as teacher. Every village had Maktab with mosque and these Maktabas were functional due to community donations. Children from village were used to regularly attend the Maktab class to learn basics of Arabic language, recitation of the Holy Quran and basic religious knowledge about Islamic rituals. In Maktabas teacher taught girl and boy students in same class, there was no discrimination on gender basis. In addition to Maktabas there were Madrassahs which were like high schools. In comparison of Maktabas, the number of Madrassahs was very small. Commonly such Madrassahs were functional either with community donations or under state patronage. In Madrassahs recitation of the Holy Quran, Tafseer (Quranic Commentary), Hadith (Sayings and Practices of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH), Fiqah (Islamic Jurisprudence and Law), Arabic language and Persian language were taught. Simply at that time, a school with Islamic curriculum was called Madrassah (Riaz, 2010).

Madrassah education in Sub-Continent was little bit different in its character as compared to other Muslim countries. In Sub-Continent the role of Madrassah in society inextricably linked with the external and internal power structure of the region. The power setup and state policies were such dominant factors which reshaped the curriculum of Madrassah and as well as determined its role in society (Riaz, 2010). For example:

“When Gazni was seized by the Turks in 1153-1154, large number of elite fled from Gazni and Khurasan, and migrated to the city of Lahore. Among those refugees there were some scholars. Their presence influenced the local culture and education” (Riaz, 2010).

In pre-colonial period, most of well-known Madrassahs were functional under state patronage and the character of education provided by such Madrassahs was in compliance with the needs of royal court. Usually students of such Madrassahs got jobs in royal courts after completion of their education. The role of such students in different state affairs was significant. But in colonial period state patronage for Madrassahs vanished which changed the entire character of Madrassah education. With passage of time, Madrassahs became representors of resistance against colonial rule. Especially at the start of 20th century, the rise of identity politics in Muslim community of colonial India became a motivating factor for Madrassahs to support anti-state activism.

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### 3. Discussion and results

#### 3.1 Muslim Education in Pre-Mughal Period

Before Muslims, a well-defined and centrally managed education system was nonexistent in Sub-Continent. The northern part of Sub-Continent (Sindh) was conquered by Muhammad Bin Qasim in 711 AD. When Muslims conquered Sindh then many Muslim scholars came and settled in its different cities. It was reported that an informal setup of Madrassah was established in the city of Debal. The subjects taught in the Madrassah were recitation Holy Quran, Tafseer (Quranic Commentary), Hadith (Sayings and Practices of the Prophet PBUH) and literature (Arabic). (Saklain, 1993). Muhammad Ghori established a Madrassah in the city of Ajmair in 1191. Generally, it was considered first formal institution which was established by any Muslims ruler in Sub-Continent (Sikand, 2005). This Madrassah became an important mile stone in the process to formalize Muslim education in India.

The Muslim rulers of Delhi Sultanate also contributed in the development of education system. They provided great support to promote traditional Muslim education and established many new Madrassahs. They also introduced a system to provide support to already existing Madrassahs to enhance their functionality. Shams-u-Din Iltutmish established a Madrassah in Delhi which considered as first formal educational institution under royal patronage. The rulers of Tughlaq dynasty continued and enhanced the process of royal patronage to Madrassahs which was started by earlier Muslim rulers. The number of Madrassahs rapidly increased in Delhi due to royal patronage. It was reported that in the reign of Muhammad Bin Tughlaq there were round about one thousand Madrassahs in Delhi (Sikand, 2005). Many students from these Madrassahs joined royal court and served in different state departments. In such Madrassahs, the curriculum was designed in compliance with the need of that time.

“The important subjects of study, broadly speaking, were Grammar, Literature, Logic, Islamic Law and its principles, Quranic commentary, Hadith, Mysticism and Scholasticism (religious philosophy). The books listed contained many of the original texts from Baghdad schools, but also contained texts from the later scholars of Bukhara, and Khwarizm in Central Asia” (Hoodbhoy, 1998).

Many Madrassahs in northern Decan were founded by the rulers of Bahmanid Dynasty. The curriculum contained the courses which were in compliance with religious as well as contemporary needs of the society. Many Khanqas, which were established by Sufi saints, also opened an informal avenue of mystic learning for adults. Commonly, in such Khanqas, there was no arrangements of education for children. It was also reported that Maktabas were established in some Khanqas to teach children the recitation of Holy Quran. In every Khanqa there was a Halqa which was like a study or discussion circle. People were used to join discussions in such Halqas. Such discussions were about Tafseer (Quranic commentary), Hadith (Sayings and Practices of the Prophet PBUH), philosophy and Mysticism (Law, 1916). During Sultanate period, the evolution of Muslim education system was significant. At the end of fourteenth century there was a Maktab in every village with suitable Muslim population. Majority of Maktabas were functional with the donations given by Muslim community of the village. These Maktabas were established in the building of Mosque. The Imam (prayer leader) of Mosque served as teacher in such Maktabas. The education of these Maktabas enabled the students to recite the Holy Quran, to perform different Islamic rituals, to write and to read. No doubt, the scope of education provided in Maktabas was limited but their role to educate Muslim community was undeniable.

In Bengal many Maktabas or Madrassahs were started with community support. Such institutions remained community dependent until the availability of state patronage. When some parts of Bengal were conquered by the rulers of Khilji dynasty then they extended their support to many Maktabas and Islamic Madrassahs which were already functional. It significantly enhanced the performance of such institutions. The rulers of Khilji dynasty also established new Madrassahs to educate Muslim community (Kaur, 1990).

In Delhi Sultanate, the number of educational institutes increased rapidly. There were two reasons behind such rapid growth. One was the state patronage and deep interest of the rulers in promotion of education. The second reason was the absence of any central curriculum. At that time, a state defined curriculum was simply nonexistent. Teachers in Madrassahs were free to decide their curriculum but the methodology of teaching in all Madrassahs was same because it commonly derived from well settled traditions of education in Islam. In some Madrassahs courses related to rational sciences were introduced which were necessary to enable students as critical thinkers. Yogindar Skind described the freedom to decide curriculum in his words as follow:

“Both transmitted as well as rational sciences were taught at madrassahs, for the notion that the two were somehow opposed to each other and that there was a clear distinction between religion and secular world was, as in other contemporary Muslim societies, quiet foreign to the medieval Indian Muslim educational system” (Sikand, 2005; Alizadeh Aghdam et al., 2014).

During Sultanate period, Muslim education system became little bit formal. This happened because every ruler of Delhi Sultanate gave education a high priority. They welcomed scholars from whole Muslim world and provide them resources to establish educational institutions. No doubt, the process to formalize Muslim education in Sub-Continent was started in Sultanate period and the foundation stones of Muslim education system in Sub-Continent were also laid during this period.

### **3.2 Muslim Education Under Great Mughals**

Great Mughals ruled over Sub-Continent for three hundred years. Mughal rulers were well aware of the importance of education. There were so many prominent scholars which were attached to Mughal court. Mughal emperors were great supporters of art and literature. They always welcomed scholars and they always provided unmatched support for promotion of education. During Mughal rule large number of Madrassahs were established in Sub-Continent. The number of Madrassahs increased exponentially during Mughal period because of the unconditional support and deep interest of rulers in the affairs of education. Education policy always remained at high priority in Mughal Empire irrespective of ruler. During Mughal period Madrassahs and scholars got high respect from royal court as well as from Muslim community.

During Mughal period the evolutionary process of Muslim education system became rapid when a debate was started between two different schools of thought. First was in favor of consolidation of tradition of religious education or the tradition of Manqulat (Transmitted or Revealed Knowledge). Second was in favor of contemporary education (Rational Sciences) and strongly recommended inclusion of courses in curriculum regarding Maqulat (Rational Sciences). But this debate was concluded and outcomes were the consolidation of traditional or Madrassah education. In Mughal period education system was consolidated on the basis of Manqulat but at the cost of Maqulat (Riaz, 2008).

According to royal documents of Zahir-U-Din Babar (who was the founder of Mughal Empire in Sub-Continent) education of subjects was the duty of state. So during the reign of Babar educational institutes of different types were established with state support. Emperor Akbar was the champion of educational reforms in Sub-Continent. He established a state department to provide state patronage to educational institutes of Muslims as well as to educational institutes of Hindus (Ikram, 1964). Akbar was the first Muslim ruler of Sub-Continent who considered education as basic right of each citizen. His policy was to educate the subjects of state irrespective of their religion. He also introduced such Madrassahs in which Muslim and Hindu children were taught contemporary subjects together in same class. In such Madrassahs the classes of religious courses were separate for Muslims and Hindus (Law, 1916). During Akbar's reign many scholars joined the royal court due to his extraordinary attitude towards scholars. Akbar assigned the duty of revision of Madrassah curriculum to Mir Fatehullah Sherazi who was a renowned scholar of his time. He updated Madrassah curriculum and included courses related to Ethics, Simple Mathematics, Agriculture, Astronomy, Logic, Government Affairs, Sanskrit, Grammar, Philosophy and Medicine (Law, 1916). The most significant feature of Akbar's education policy was the inclusion of rational sciences (Logic, Philosophy and Scholastic Theology) in basic curriculum which changed the perception of Muslims about importance of rational sciences (Ikram, 1964).

The Emperor Jahangir introduced a law; if a rich man or a rich traveler died without heir, his property would be transferred to the crown and be utilized for building and repairing Madrassahs and Monasteries (Riaz, 2008). Jahangir also continued financial support to thousands of Madrassahs. Due to his interest in the affairs of education, many opportunities were created to educate people irrespective to their class.

In the reign of Shahjahan, Imperial College was established in Delhi in 1650 (Law, 1916). The curriculum of Imperial College was designed on modern grounds to fulfill the needs of time. During Mughal period the growth of education system was remarkable and such expansion was in terms of rapid increase in number of Madrassahs or institutions. But on other hand, a serious attempt to upgrade or to redesign the existing curriculum regarding physical sciences or European languages was simply absent. Early Mughals only supported and promoted traditional educational system in Sub-Continent (Robinson, 2001).

Aurang-zaib had an orthodox mindset and he managed all state affairs purely in according with Islamic Shariah. Like other Mughal Emperors he was also a staunch promoter of education but only for Muslims and in pure religious paradigm. He established many new Madrassahs and provided financial support to many already existing Madrassahs. He established Frangi Mahall (the name of an institute) in Lucknow to promote the learning of rational sciences. Rapidly it became the largest learning center in eighteenth century India. Mullah Qutbullah Sihlawi (A renowned scholar and courtier of Aurang-zaib) was the initiator of the Frangi Mahall. The third son of Mullah Qutbullah Sihlawi was Mullah Nizamuddin who wrote a popular curriculum for Madrassah education which became popular as Dars-e-Nizami. It contained traditional as well as modern courses. The unique feature of the curriculum was that it was capable to enhance critical thinking ability among students. The curriculum was keenly designed to enable students as well learned ones as well as to enable them as critical thinkers (Robinson, 2001). With the passage of time Dars-e-Nizami became standard of Madrassah education in Sub-Continent due to its unique features (Riaz, 2010).

In eighteenth century, Shah Waliullah (a renowned scholar from Madrasah-e-Rahimia) was a promoter of the tradition of Manqulat (Transmitted or Revealed Knowledge) in education. One of the outcomes of his successful venture was elimination of rational sciences in Muslim traditional education. Shah Waliullah denounced and criticized the learning of rational sciences in his speeches. From the platform of Madrasah-e-Rahimia he gave new interpretation of Islamic Shariah and it was an effort to develop compatibility between Islamic knowledge and the contemporary situation. The role of Madrasah-e-Rahimia and Shah Waliullah was a milestone in evolutionary process of Muslim education in sub-continent because it revolutionized paradigm of Muslim education in Sub-Continent.

#### 4. Conclusion

In sub-continent, at the start of Sultanate period there was no formal or well defined education system. There was no central curriculum. No doubt the rulers of Sultanate Delhi provided a remarkable support for different Madrassahs. During Mughal period remarkable developments had been committed in order to promote education of revealed knowledge and curriculum development. But on other hand they did not establish a linked and centrally managed network of Madrassahs. No doubt, a separate department was established to manage affairs of education but instead of modernization of education system it maintained the continuity of traditional system of education. No targeted attempt was made for inclusion of rational sciences and European languages in curriculum to modernize education system. Such deficiency was appeared as incompatibility of Madrassah education system with dynamic circumstances of society in colonial period. It became irrelevant when British government implemented policy to promote English education.

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