



A Brief Study of Muslim Education System in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Times

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the educational experiences of Muslims, specifically within the context of pre-colonial and 18th- and 19th-century colonial Bengal. It examines the factors contributing to the perceived educational “backwardness” of the Muslim community, exploring both the socio-political and economic causes of this phenomenon. The study highlights how Muslims in Bengal navigated and survived colonial domination, with particular emphasis on the influence of the Woods Despatch of 1854 and the Education Commission of 1882. These two key events are analysed to understand their impact on shaping educational policies and practices during British rule, and how they influenced the development of education among Muslims in the region.

Key Words: Muslim Education System, Pre-colonial Times, Colonial Times,

Introduction

The pre-colonial forms of knowledge rested on the Quran among the Muslims. Quran was the foremost significant religious text which was transmitted orally, learnt by young Muslims after the “Bismillah” ceremony. The oral transmission of the Quran from one generation to another continued until the death of Prophet Muhammad (632 AD), a period from when writing came into being among Muslims.¹

Pre-Colonial Muslim Education

The early institutions among the Muslims were makhtabs, madrassas, darghas, khanqahs, and karkhanas which continued under the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals and also under the colonial rule.² The makhtabs were places where the prime motive was to make children memorise verses from Quran, and the language used was Arabic, Persian or Urdu.³ The pedagogical method would include the teachers who were called *mullahs* or *maulvis* and transmit knowledge orally to their students, who would then write it down and try to retain it, once familiar with the text, the latter would obtain an *ijaza* (license) to teach.⁴

The encounter between the colonial masters and the Indian native population began in the 15th century but it was in the 1765 that the British attained the *diwani* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In 1780s that the East India Company faced a major challenge as to how to govern India.

The Colonial Education

It was in Bengal that the waves of transformation initially began. From the early 19th century onwards the British introduced English as the medium of language. It was from here, that the aims of the colonisers and the colonised differed. The former saw education as a means to rule and govern which ultimately helped them in creating loyal subjects. While the latter, who were mainly local magnates or the upper caste Hindus, the aim was to secure government jobs and make maximum use of the benefits provided by the colonial state. Therefore they were able to acquire positions in the higher levels of education whereas the Muslims remained dominant in the lower levels. This depicts a kind of social hierarchy in education.⁵

From the late 18th century onwards, orientalists such as William Jones started revising the forgotten glory of India. They began equating Sanskrit with Latin and began looking for similarities between themselves and Indians.⁶ Hence began the cultural revivalism with the establishment of the Asiatic Society in 1784. On the other hand, Anglicists wanted to replace the pre-modern languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian simply because they were outdated and were not sufficiently developed. Therefore, an emphasis on English as the medium of language was laid.

On learning about political changes, the upper-caste Hindus were preparing their minds to enter into the circles of English intelligentsia, while the Muslim reaction differed. They resisted the new changes that were being introduced by the colonisers and would provide them with no dominance over Hindus, over which they were previously ruling.⁷ We find that the earlier beneficiaries of these changes were high-caste Hindus (*bhadralok*) who assumed the material benefits.⁸ The introduction of English although on the one hand, increased the number of Hindu employment but on the other hand, it

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increased inequality among the Muslims as they began to lose their jobs and were pushed into poverty. Hence, till the 1870s we find that the proportion of Muslims to Hindus remained less. The Muslims were engaged in menial jobs like that of porters, menders etc.⁹

It was also the time when Britain was emerging as a global power. The ideas of liberalism were making inroads into society. The liberalists regarded India as “backward”, “uncivilised” and “barbaric”.¹⁰ They assumed themselves as colonial masters and saw themselves on a civilizing mission.¹¹

The Wood’s Despatch

In 1854 Wood’s Despatch was introduced which proposed to modernise the existing indigenous educational modes and to establish Universities. With a liberalist mind-set, the government now began to spread western education which conflicted with the religious beliefs of the Muslims. Initially, the madrasahs and makhtabs did not receive any government support and Muslims found it difficult to adjust to the colonial policies. The religious elites felt threatened when English was being imposed as they were more concerned with safeguarding their language and culture. The Muslims saw the knowledge of scriptures, the Quran and traditions as the survival mechanism under colonial rule, and in doing so they adopted Print technology as a means.¹² This attitude of the Muslims was seen as backward which created pressure among them.

The Wood’s Despatch of 1854 aimed at the following:

- The government tried to lure the Muslim masses by making ordinary schools attractive.¹³
- Its aim was to spread English as the medium of instruction, but vernacular languages will also be promoted.
- It introduced a system of grant-in-aid to the established schools that were ready to adopt English and provide modern education.
- It provided grants to fee-charging schools and those who denied to do so were not provided grants.¹⁴

The consequences of the Wood’s Despatch were clear and impacted the Muslim education in the following ways:

First, it couldn’t provide education to all sections of society and was only limited to the upper caste Hindus, a small group which was concentrated in Bengal largely. This section of society was able to pay for their education while Muslims and others could not. Also, the state did not have many financial resources so it required the help of local magnates.

Second, even though the vernacular language was permitted, the English schools in Bengal had Bengali which was a foreign language to the Muslims, which was ultimately taught by Hindu teachers.¹⁵ The state completely overlooked the fact that the proportion of the Muslim population was more than Bengalis.

Third, the religious interests and education of the Muslims were signed out. On the one hand, Arabic and Persian were

ignored in certain ways, as they would be of no use in the colonial administration and on the other hand, the Muslim-sanctioned holidays were reduced from 21-11. While in some government departments, there were no sanctioned holidays for Muslims which caused resentment among them.¹⁶

Fourth, the readily acceptance of Hindus created a “class of agents” who cooperated with the British and remained loyal to them, which ultimately led to the stratification of the society. The purpose of this education was to provide basic knowledge to create loyal indigenous bureaucrats who would in turn establish Hindu schools and preach modern Education. This led to a formalisation and centralisation of the education system under colonial rule.¹⁷

Fifth, they realised that no unitary system could be adopted in India for the advancement of education as it created animosities among Hindus and Muslims. The government schools established in Bengal failed to “develop a class of Muslims who could successfully compete at Universities and could secure a job in the recognisable profession.”¹⁸

Sixth, the poor sections of society including Muslim peasants could not afford western- style education. But the ones who could send their children to either pathshala or a makhtab, gave preference to distance over the choice of institution.¹⁹

Seventh, no provisions were made for other marginalised section of the society and women. Only male elites had access to education initially. Women were continued to be taught at homes by *ustani* (women teacher) and *maulvis*.²⁰

Further, the in’am commission played an important role in the exclusion and marginalisation of Muslim ma’afidar groups and their families that were dependent on revenue-free grants.²¹ They were bureaucrats and were affluent in the Persian language. The Muslims had been retaining their trusteeship in the British to protect these land grants which were meant for the advancement of the education of the Muslims. It appears from the work of W.W. Hunter that there was a misuse of these funds as the company diverted the scholastic funds into the establishment of an English College solely for Hindus.²²

The Formal Education System

From the 1870s onwards the colonial state played an important role in the curriculum of modern education. It tried to introduce the formal elements of Inspection, Scheduling, and compulsory Attendance. A process of homogenization of education was taking place slowly and gradually. In 1882 the Education Commission was established to address the growing disparity between Hindus and Muslims, to pay attention to the Muslim demand for separate educational institutions and to provide special concessions to them. It was also the period which saw the beginning of Separatism between the Hindus and the Muslims. Despite their efforts, the colonial government appeared biased for Muslims as madrasahs were losing their importance all the more. In reality, what the colonial government did in the late nineteenth century was the social mobilisation of the Muslims who now gained consciousness of a separate identity.²³ Therefore, it

is seen that a significant amount of role has been played by the anjumans and the Muslim reformers some of which are discussed in this paper.

At a time when several debates were going on regarding modern education for Muslims, the indigenous Muslim reformers did not sit back. They got actively involved in the spread of education. One such example is that of Nawab Abdul Latif who started the Mohemadan Literary Society in 1863. It aimed to spread education amongst Muslims. He was in support of English education and encouraged Muslims for the same but not at the cost of neglecting the religious education. Both of them would help in the growth and progress of the Muslim community.²⁴

Tablighi Movement and the spread of Education amongst Muslims

On the other hand, we find Maulana Ilyas who initiated the Tablighi Movement which aimed to provide education to Muslims in an entirely different manner through the “moving madrassa” which meant the travelling of the well-learned, well-versed teachers from one place to another who acted as guides, cook or as a leader sometimes. This was the distinguishing feature of the movement.²⁵ Another distinguishing feature of the movement was the participation of women who supported their husbands.²⁶ The movement also had some limitations which are as follows:

- The Tablighi movement was spreading Islamic ideas, values, mutual assistance, morals and traditions.
- Their main target was Mewatis whom the Tablighis regarded as similar. Nonetheless, the movement welcomed all sections of society.²⁷
- The Tablighi leaders did not encourage their participants to engage in politics but operated in the political arena as they did not differentiate themselves from the society.
- They made more use of oral means rather than print material, therefore suggesting that education should be intellectual and not text-based. However, such a practice slightly differed in the colonial context, as pre-colonial Islamic practices in South Asia transmitted oral knowledge on various subjects.²⁸

Hence, we find that there were continuities between pre-colonial and colonial times. Amar Farooqui has shown how Muslim scholars of Delhi like Nazir Ahmad, Sadruddin Khan Azurda and a few others were able to enter into government jobs, who were retaining the indigenous modes of education, and also maintained indirect criticism towards the colonial state.²⁹

Conclusion:

The position of Muslims in the field of education concerned with my period of research portrays them as backward to some extent. Although the colonial government tried to bring western style knowledge it failed to recognise the hesitant attitude of the Muslims and found it affordable to form Hindus as their allies. The liberal ideas of Britain could

not bring a smooth transition in the pre-modern minds of the Muslims. On the one hand, the Orthodox and patriarchal ulema were scared to lose their culture and traditions and on the other hand, the Muslim women retained the cultural elements in the society through Zenana tradition. Moreover, the reforms were carried but in such a community reform became problematic.³⁰ The system of Purdah continued among Muslim women, which ultimately created pressure among the Muslim males to modernise their women but not on cultural rejection.³¹ Hence, both Muslim men and women were regarded as, and remained backward.

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