

DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION OF MUSLIMS DURING
THE PORTUGUESE, DUTCH AND BRITISH RULE IN
SRI LANKA

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Education is the most important for development of any society. Since the dawn of civilization, man has been on the process of learning. It is a continuous process and still he is learning. But, learning methods and ways are different from region to region and from society to society.

The history of the Muslims in this country is largely a history of their education. Islam has always given the highest place to education in its scheme of things and the persons who devote their time and energies to the accumulation of learning. But, it is most important in Islam and in other religions, that the knowledge made an essential preliminary to the realization of God.

“Read : In the name of thy Lord who Geateth:

Geath man from a clot.

Read : And thy Lord is the most Bounteous who teacheth
by the pen,

Teacheth man that which he knew not”.¹

These are the words of the first revelation that came to Muhammad (Sal). Though he was unlettered, he was yet bidden by God to deliver His Message, offering man, though of humble origin, a high destiny. In this verse of the Holy Qur’an man is remind that he alone of all His Creations, is possessed of the capacity to acquire knowledge. Thus to read and understand, ponder and reflect, obey and follow this first revelation and

all the subsequent revelations which together form the Holy Qur'an, becomes the worship without knowledge is worship incomplete.² Therefore, knowledge is essential even to worship God.

As a historian, I would like to trace the early settlement of Muslims and their historical background of development of education. The focus of this article is in tracing the Muslim's interest towards acquiring knowledge through religion. To begin with, I have to analyse the early educational facilities and status of them.

It is important to note that, Sri Lanka is strategically located in the Indian Ocean. It helped the seafarers and maritime traders to have a flourishing trade. Prior to the 6th century A.D. the pre – Islamic Arabs dominated the trading of the Indian Ocean and participated in trade with India, Malaysia, Indonesia and China.³

From the middle of the 6th century A.D., and subsequent expansion of Muslim empire and Arab commercial activities in the Indian Ocean, affected gradually the people of South India and Sri Lanka.⁴ These activities enabled the people of this region to know about the religion Islam and Muhammad Nabi (Sal). Islam was introduced to Ceylon during the period of Muhammad Nabi (Sal) itself. Islamic learning and to its dissemination have always been accorded great respect in every Islamic society.

In Sri Lanka also, the Muslims who settled earlier went for religious learning of Qur'an. Their learning was Qur'an centered. In this context I would like to quote Viscount Milner, the Englishman is appropriate on education;

“Every student knows how high in the teaching of Muhammad is the rank assigned to knowledge. In the theory of Mohammedanism, Piety and learning go hand in hand. And so they did in practice during those early centuries, when the religion of the Prophet displayed its greatest expansiveness and vitality. Nor was the term “Learning” in those days, though always associated with Theology, interpreted in any illiberal sense. During some of the darkest ages of human history the lamp of science was, to a great extent, kept alive by Arab Votaries”.⁵

In this sense, the Qur’an centered learning is always indeed the special feature of the Muslim tradition. The Holy Qur’an is not a mere book of religious maxims or a collection of devotional hymns, not is it of human or prophetic origin; instead it is a code of life laying down the correct pattern of conduct. It is the word of God revealed to his last prophet. Education in Islam therefore begins and ends with the Holy Qur’an. All branches of knowledge whether strictly theological or broadly scientific, thus derive their inspiration from the Holy Qur’an.⁶

The Establishment of Maktabs

The establishment of Maktabs is an important aspect to note that the learning in Sri Lanka during 7th and 8th centuries A.D. confined to the Mosques. In Mosques and especially in the large congregational ones, circles of students would group themselves around a teacher sitting against a pillar and expounding a subject through reading and commenting upon a book.⁷ They were categorized into elementary religious education and advanced religious education. Later came the instruction in professional activities arts and crafts. Thus the religious education was the most

important one in an Islamic Society. The Holy Qur'an was the base of every branch of education. To strengthen this aspect I like to quote the following:

“Since education began with the Qur'an, it was perhaps inevitable that a sacred place should be selected for the imparting of sacred knowledge (knowledge that is inherently sacred). This explained why the mosque was found to be the most convenient place for holding the elementary school. Along with boys, girls were allowed to attend school though co-education did not go beyond the elementary stage. At an early state, with this study of the Qur'an was associated the art of writing, which in fact, has given the elementary school its name of 'Maktab'. In the elementary school, the learning and reciting of the Qur'an was the principal course of instruction and along with it, writing and simple computations. To this must be added rudimentary knowledge of Islam enabling Muslims to fulfill their religious duties.⁸ The Maktab became a recognized institution for removing illiteracy and acquiring a preliminary knowledge of the Qur'an and some proficiency in the Arabic language and yet education of the children in the Maktab was sought by their parents not merely for the three R's reading, writing and arithmetic – but for their good upbringing, a duty cost on the parents and the teachers.”⁹

The Maktab (Qur'an Pallikoodam) education was the main elementary education in Sri Lanka, based on religion. The Muslim students were sent to Maktab to learn Holy Qur'an.

“The Maktab thus became an efficient instrument for the spread of literary and the promotion of basic education. Catering essentially for the societies need of religion, it was closely associated, both in organization and curriculum with the local Mosque; this ensured that no Muslim area whether urban or rural was without its own Maktab with this local base and parental support it could and did survive without any guidance from a central authority or financial support from the Government; its limited curriculum needed no large scale libraries or elaborate equipment. As a result, the Maktab provided an enduring foundation for the educational achievements of the Muslims during the Middle Age.”¹⁰

It was the real situation at Maktab during the earliest times in Sri Lanka. It was the Centre where various kind of learnings were also imparted through their curriculum.

The Establishment of Madrasa

The origin of Madrasa is often ascribed to Nizam al-Mulk (1018 – 92) the Wazir of the first Saljuk ruler of Baghdad, but in fact it goes back to an earlier times. The students, those who intent on continuing their studies, the Madrasas gave opportunities of secondary education. These institutions, were mostly state supported. During many period of Muslim history, the rulers concerned vied with one another in their quest for fame and name as the Chief Patron of learning. Thus could the important capitals of the Muslims empires and kingdoms always boast of well-endowed Madrasas and specialized institutions for the training of physicians, chemists, astronomers translators etc. The Madrasa was a school often although not always attached to a Mosque; it included a

place of residence for students. The Muslim world knew no barriers of travel which was infect promoted by the Annual pilgrimage to Mecca obligatory on every Muslim once in his or her life time; travelling in search of knowledge, being invested with a religious sanction, was always popular with the scholars and savants among the Muslims. The curriculum of the Madrasa, generally speaking, comprised Grammar, Literature, Logic, Islamic Law, Quranic Commentary Hadith, Mysticism and religious philosophy.¹¹

Muslim Education During Medieval Period

Muslim education up to the last century, would have followed the earlier systems. By means of the intercourse with Arabian Gulf and Egypt, on the other hand with the Mediterranean countries, the standard of Arabic was raised. Arguing with the views of Sir Alexander Johnston;

“It may, therefore, be reasonably inferred that the Maktab and the Madrasa systems of education prevailed as widely among the Muslims of Ceylon as in the territories belonging to the Abbasid Empire. The Cufic inscription discovered in Colombo bearing the date of A.H. 337 (A.C. 0948-9) and the tradition associated with it led added support to the view that the cultural and educational contacts between the Muslims of Ceylon and the Abbasid capital at Baghdad were close and fruitful and they accepted the cultural leadership of Baghdad in the general pattern of their educational institutions.”¹²

As a result of the fall of the Abbasid Empire the Muslims of Ceylon looked upon their co-religionists along the Malabar Coast from that time onwards the influence of the Mussalmans of the sub - continent of India

came to be felt in Ceylon. However, in the curriculum and organization of the Maktabas and the Madrasas of these Muslims, there were no fundamental differences from those of Baghdad and other centres.

Early Centuries of Western Education

The Muslim community of Ceylon were very active, when the Portuguese and the Dutch confronted them. But, the power of the crescent was destroyed very soon by the power of the cross. They were compelled to take refuge of the Kandyan Kingdom. They were completely isolated. They lost touch not only with the Muslim world in general, but also with neighbouring India. In consequence, once flourishing Maktabas and Madrasas, were disappeared. The few Madrasas, that survived deplorably deteriorated in standards. The Muslims became religiously obscurantist and intellectually sterile.

But, their own educational structure was not much impaired. The Quranic schools continued to exist in the Mosques or the houses of the Ulema; for all that was required was the services of an Alim and ground space for the children to sit. They were the institutions which did not obtrude on the official eye.¹³ Those students who wished to continue their education usually went to Malabar or other parts of South India, and since the Muslims were engaged in trade they were in close contact with their co-religionists in India; while the presence of the Zamorin's fleet, mainly offered and manned by Muslims, off the coast, frequently solved the transport problem. In exceptional cases Muslims went to North India and from there to other countries of the Middle East. In any case, they opted out of the educational systems of the Portuguese and the Dutch as they mainly concentrated on spread of Christianity.

The system of education of Muslims during the rule of Portuguese and the Dutch was traditional ones. It was based on religion. i.e.: reciting of Qur'an. The Maktab (Qur'an Pallikoodams) and the Madrasa, played an important role in imparting, primary and secondary education for the Muslim children. Whatever themes were taken to learn, they were generally based on the glorious history of the past.

Madrasahs usually called Arabic Colleges in Sri Lankan terminology, have played a unique role in the Islamic World of the past. They do so today too. Madrasahs, as a rule, are the transmitting agent of Islamic learning from one generation to the succeeding one.

The origins of Madrasah education in Sri Lanka are lost in the mists of antiquity, to put it mildly. It is possible that Khalid Ibn Bakaya, the Iraqi Arab scholar sent to Sri Lanka by the Caliphate in Baghdad, established a Madrasah in Colombo, in the tenth century. Sir Alexander Johnston Chief Justice of Ceylon in early 19th century, had stated that before the Portuguese period, questions on maritime law relating to Muslim ships and Muslim Sailors who were recited in Colombo. This presupposes the existence of Madrasahs in Colombo and elsewhere in the Island.

And since during that time Arabic was fairly prevalent in the ports of Sri Lanka such as Colombo, a background existed for the development of Madrasah education. Muslim theologians of Sri Lanka it is likely had contacts with Madrasahs in Islamic countries such as those at Nishapur and Sadiyya Bayhaqiyya and Isfarinayya Madrasahs. There were many celebrated Madrasahs the pre – eminent El – Azhar among them. Others were Al – Rambiyya, Al – Nasariyya and Al – Salahiyya in Egypt, Al – Nizammiyya in Iraq, Al – Amaniyya, Al – Nishiyya, Al – Tarphaniyya, Al – Khatiriyya and Al – Shariyya in Syria. Besides, these, cities such as

Samarkand Balkh, Aleppo, Damascuss and Lahore had note – worthy Madrasahs. And it is very likely that the learned Muslims of Sri Lanka had contacts with most of them.

Before the Portuguese occupation of maritime Ceylon, two types of Madrasahs were prevalent. There was the single teacher Madrasah (which would perhaps be called today Junior Madrasahs) and the multi teacher Madrasah. The latter, frequently had visiting or itinerant teachers who would stay for a time in Sri Lanka and then go out to their countries.

The Madrasah structure in Sri Lanka was however, dislocated during the Portuguese and Dutch periods, although some individuals were able to pursue their higher studies under reputed theologians in North and South India. Since the seas abutting the west Coast of Sri Lanka were patrolled by the ships of the Zamorin of Calicut (and officered by Muslims) a number of Muslims from Ceylon studied in Madrasahs in the regions of present Kerala state in South India.

Muslim Education During the British Period

The revitalization of the Madrasah system in India and Sri Lanka was the aftermath of the occupation of these two countries by the British. During the middle of the 19th Century the Muslims of India were rethinking their religious and social position.

The practice and works of such Islamic scholars of great repute as Saikh Ahmed Sirihindi, Shaikh Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehlavi, Shah Waliullah, Syed Ahmed Shaheed, began to assume a new momentum and immediacy. The failure of the revolution of 1857 in India (Sepoy Rehallion)

brought home to Muslims of India should co-exist with. In the circumstances, the institutionalization of religious education became a paramount necessity. The vivification of Madrasahs preserved the existing religious knowledge, Madrasahs were bulwark against secular values. Madrasahs represented the 'percolation theory' of education, above all Madrasahs preserved Islamic identity.

Men of learning and philanthropy, moved forward in the North and South of the Indian sub – continent, to establish number of Madrasahs. Dar – ul – Ulum was founded in Deohand in 1866 by Moulavi Muhammad Qasim of Nanotah, who was a follower of Shah Waliullah's school and was also influenced by Sir Seyed Ahmad Khan. Another school was founded at Lucknow by Moulavi Muhammad Ali Monghyrawi.¹⁴

The impulse to Madrasah education began sporadically in the South India with the last stages of Mughal paramountcy in the Madrasat-ul-Qalam of Muhammad Ali Walajah in Madras. The subsequent Madrasahs were established by Seyed Abul Hasan at Vellore Fort. They were primarily religious institutions where learned and committed groups of men taught like – minded pupils. Their institutional structure was perhaps not strongly defined. A stronger institutional structure was seen in the latter developments of the 19th century in Madras, Tirunelveli and Kutanallur. These new model Madrasahs utilized the organizational expertise of and founding was largely derived from commercial enterprise.

Mainly the same reasons fuelled the desire to establish Madrasahs in Sri Lanka. The retention of the identity of Muslims in a world fast being influenced by Western education and Western values, was the leitmotiv. Madrasah education in Sri Lanka during that period went hand in hand with the establishment or re – establishment of Mosques. In this process Ulema from Sri Lanka and India co-operated. An important figure was

the South Indian savant Muhammad Ibn Ahmed Lebbe from Kilkarai who was popularly known as Mapillai Lebbe Alim.

Among the early Madrasahs in Sri Lanka are Madrasat – ul – Minnathul Fa’ a siyya (Matarara); Madrasat – ul – Mursiyya (Weligama); Madrasat – ul – Ghafooriyya (Maharagama) and the Madrasat – ul – Khiliriyye (Weligama); Partly because the principals and most of the senior teachers of these Madrasahs were graduates of the chief Madrasahs of South India, the subjects and work schedules of Sri Lanka Madrasahs reflected those of South India. For a long time, main Madrasahs of South India as the Baqiath – us – Salihath of Vellore and the Jamaliyya of Perambur (Madras) continued to attract students of Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan Madrasahs gave education, board and lodging gratis. They gave a through grounding in Islamic theology and a systematic inculcation of discipline and manners. The subjects taught thought integrated, were many. For instance, they included. ‘Sirat – us – Safa’ (Quirath), ‘Tajwid (recital of Holy Qur’an), Mahfil min – al – Qur’an’ (Memorization of Holy Qur’an), ‘Tafsir’ (Commentary of the Holy Qur’an), Ilm – ul – Qur’an (Science of learning the Holy Qur’an); etc.

From early period to this century, Madrasahs were community specific. After this period, they became nation specific. The state council period saw considerable improvements in the acceptance of Madrasah education. The presence of two Muslims in the executive committee of Education (Sir Razik Fareed and Dr. T.B. Jayah) were instrumental for these beneficent changes. A renounced educationist Dr. A.M.A. Azeez reviewed the situation in the following terms;

“With a view to remedying the lack of educational facilities in some of the remoter parts of Ceylon, the

Government in 1935 was prepared to pay the salaries of qualified teachers, who could be attached to places of religious worship in areas where there are no other schools. The Muslims naturally came in for their share and several of their 'Mahtabs' were thereby benefited The appointment of Arabic teachers and their payment by the Government was made possible by the (Educational) Departmental recognition of Madrasahs and their Moulavi Certificates. Religious institution on the school premises was now being encouraged, paying the way for the enactment, as section 4 of Ordinance No. 26, of 1939, that instruction in the religion of the parent of each pupil in a Government school shall be given to that pupils as part of his course of studies."

The Department of Education in consequence, began to register Madrasahs in Sri Lanka, grouping them as Junior or Senior Madrasahs (the later giving a complete, and the former, a partial course of Moulavi studies).

An Inspector of Arabic was appointed and an Arabic Unit set up in the Department of Education. An Arabic studies Promotion Society, under the auspices of the Department of Education, also, came into being meanwhile, Arabic studies in the University of Ceylon were given a fillip by the decision of the Executive Committee of Education to accept Arabic as a subject for Senior recruitment schemes such as the Ceylon Civil Service Examination and the Police Probationers Examination.

Number of Madrasahs were being set up in the fallowing years. The entire face of higher education, in Sri Lanka began to change. The unitary

university of Ceylon gave place to a multiple university structure, when the Vidyodaya and the Vidyalankara Pirivenas assumed legal status as universities on 01st January 1959. English till then as the medium of instruction at the university. However, the University Council decided on 14th January 1957 to teach in Sinhala, Tamil and English in the Universities from 1960. New subjects were introduced at the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Examination. As a result, an academically inclined Moulavi could choose Tamil, Islam, Arabic and Islamic Civilization as his subjects for the Advanced Level, enter the University to read any of the three subjects or specialization in Arabic or Islamic Civilization. Through these means, Madrasah education entered the national mainstream in education.

Arabic studies, till that time taught by a few Muslim schools in the English medium, became broad based. Among the few schools, Zahira College, Colombo was pre – eminent in Arabic studies. It was the pioneer in taking Arabic teaching in English to the public at large. Meanwhile, the Department of Education in Association with, the Department of Examinations, had introduced an Al – Alim Examination for Moulavis and others. This to some extent, was a form of distant education.

When the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs was established in May 1981, the function of registering and regulating Madrasahs was transferred to it by the Department of Education. At present, this function comes under the Ministry of State for Muslims Religious and Cultural Affairs. The setting up of Madrasahs have increased. In 1992 there were over, seventy Madrasahs registered with the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs which comes under the Ministry of state for Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs. Thus, the Madrasahs today, are in the forefront of Muslim education in Sri Lanka.