

The Mosque Programme of Education in Sri Lanka: An Analysis

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Abstract

Islamic textual resources and historical experiences emphasize on essential of the knowledge and education for human development and social progression. Thus, the education was a major programme of mosques from early Islamic period. The mosques in Sri Lanka conduct the educational programmes to facilitate Islamic way of life among the Muslim community. This paper aimed to study the educational activities of the mosque in Sri Lanka. The analysis of survey data administered and collected from the randomly selected mosques along with the interview data analysis and field notes were employed to achieve this objective. The major findings reveal that the mosques function as educational institutes to the certain extents with the confined religious objectives. The qur'an madrasas are only programme in the vast majority of the mosques to train the Muslim children to recite qur'an and provide the Islamic basics and principles to them. Some of the mosques extend its scope to include Tahfiẓ al-qur'ān and Tajwīd al-qur'an. In the minority context, the mosques need to wider their educational activities to cope up with the Muslim educational needs and aspirations.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Mosque Programme, Muslims in Sri Lanka. Qur'an Madrasah

1. Introduction

Education is the process of facilitating acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits. The method may be varied such as provided systematic instruction for, training or instructing mentally or morally or schooling and training given to the young (and, extension, to adults) in the preparation for the work of life; and also, culture or development of powers, formation of character etc. Education has therefore, always been an indispensable part of human life. Education occupied great significance in human society since time immemorial. The means and ways of the mechanism have varied from time to time. Perhaps, it was subject to transformation from primitive period to medieval and medieval to modern. The phenomenon of education might

have undergone transformation in accordance to the ideology of the society. Because of dynamic nature of education, there is no common agreement on the question of education. As a result, various kinds of concepts are prevailing such as Indian, Greek, Western and Islamic.

The entire perceptive of 'education in Islam' or Islamic education is derived mainly from its primary sources and interpretations. The Arabic term *ilm* which means knowledge occupies a substantial position within Islam. Therefore, it has, from the inception, placed a high premium on education and has enjoyed a long and rich intellectual tradition. The primary textual source of Islam makes more than 800 references to the education. The importance of education is repeatedly highlighted in the Quran with frequent injunctions (Quran, Verse 58:11; Verse 20:114; Verse 2:269; verse 2:282; Verse 58:11). These verses accord significance on the acquisition of knowledge and provide a strong motivation for Muslims to strive for education and learning. The Quran was a quite revolutionary for medieval Arabian society that was the predominantly illiterate.

The first qur'anic word '*iqra*' (means 'read') intents to make Muslims, especially Arabs who had enjoyed a rich oral tradition, interacted with by means of reading and reciting qur'anic words. Similarly, hadith provided an idea of universal and compulsory education. The Prophet himself has decreed knowledge to be obligatory upon every Muslim male and female and considers no suffering or sacrifice too great in its fulfillment. He has declared good education and training of children, sons as well as daughters, as the best gift a father can give to them.

It has been reported that in the Battle of Badr against Quraysh, led by the Prophet himself, enemies were captured and the Prophet, instead of penalizing them, asked the literate among them to teach twelve Muslims (al-Naisaburi). This shows that the Prophet was in favour to extend the acquisition of knowledge even from the unbelievers. He also advised his followers to acquire knowledge and learning from everyone and from everywhere, as if knowledge and learning were the lost property of the faithful. According to prominent scholars of Islam who the best interpreters of ideas on education, they expressed, closeness to God could be attained only through knowledge (Hameed, 1986). Hence the believers must acquire knowledge with the same zeal and enthusiasm, as if they were re-claiming their lost valuables or property. These sayings clearly reveal that the Prophet accorded the highest value to education and exhorted his *sahabah* (followers) to acquire education by all reasonable means. Therefore, Muslims were inspired to seek knowledge as a religious duty and cheerfully bear hardships, if any, in its acquisition.

In the Islamic theory of knowledge, the three Arabic terms are used for education, representing the various dimensions of the educational process as perceived by Islam. The most widely used word for education in a formal sense is *ta'lim*, from the root

'*alima* (to know, to be aware, to perceive, to learn), which is used to denote knowledge being sought or imparted through instruction and teaching. *Tarbiyah*, from the root *raba* (to increase, to grow, to rear), implies a state of spiritual and ethical nurturing in accordance with the will of God. *Ta'dib*, from the root *aduba* (to be cultured, refined, well-mannered), suggests a person's development of sound social behavior. What is meant by sound requires a deeper understanding of the Islamic conception of the human being (Zaman, 2001).

In Islam, education aims to train the sensibility of the pupil in such a manner that in their attitude to life, their actions, decisions and approaches, to all kinds of knowledge, they are governed by the spiritual and deeply felt ethical values of Islam. They are trained, and mentally so disciplined, that they want to acquire knowledge not merely to satisfy an intellectual curiosity or just for material worldly benefit, but to develop as rational, righteous beings and bring about the spiritual, moral and physical welfare of their families, their people and mankind. According to the Islamic Concept of education, the learner, being human, is made up of a dual nature of spirit and body. The spiritual faculty is known as the *ruh* (soul), *aql* (mind or intellect), *qalb* (emotion), or *nafs* (self) according to the function that is ascribed to it. *Aql* (the faculty of reason), unique to human beings, elevates them above the rest of creation (Zaman, 2001).

The main aims and objectives of Islamic education are to teach the Holy Qur'an as a first step of education; to provide experiences which are based on fundamentals of Islam, as embodied in the Holy Qur'an, and the Sunnah, these cannot be changed; to provide knowledge and skills, with the clear understanding that they might change according to the changing needs of the society; to develop a commitment towards the basic values prescribed in religion and scripture; to develop a sense of accountability towards the almighty, creator so that man passes his life like a faithful servant; to encourage international brother-hood, irrespective of difference in generations, occupations, and social classes, amongst the persons who are knit together by a common religion and faith; to foster the great consciousness of the divine presence in the universe; to bring man nearer to an understanding of God and of the relation in which man stands to his creator (Tibawi, 1976).

Prophet Muhammad was a teacher. He trained the mankind to attain the education irrespective of its disciplines. The mosque was used as the focus of teaching from the earliest days of Islam. As early as in the reign of the caliph Umar narrators were appointed to the mosques in cities of Basra, Damascus, and Kufa. These narrators were responsible for reciting the Quran and the Hadith. For many centuries institutions of learning remained connected to the mosque. Moreover, Pious and learned Muslims (*mu'allim or mudarris*), dedicated to make the teachings of the Quran more accessible to the Islamic community through primary Islamic school, taught the faithful which came to be known as the *kuttab* (plural, *katatib*). Historians are uncertain as to when the *katatib* were first established, but with the widespread desire of the faithful to

study the Quran, *katatib* could be found in virtually every part of the Islamic empire by the middle of the eighth century. The *kuttab* served a vital social function as the only vehicle for formal public instruction for primary-age children and continued so until Western models of education were introduced in the modern period (Shalaby, 1954).

The centres in that, the Islamic sciences have been taught over the ages have been an integral aspect of Islamic civilization. Apart from the mosque was at once the religious and social centre of the Islamic community as well as the centre for learning. To this day Quranic schools where the (fountain head) of all Islamic learnings, the Quran, is taught are mostly connected with the local mosques in various quarters of Muslim cities. Two main institutions which played a key role in imparting knowledge to students were the *Maktab* (*Kuttab*), and Madrasah. For many centuries, these institutions of learning remained connected to the mosque and they were generally supported by religious endowments (Mahmood, 1994).

The *maktab* is a type of beginners or primary school. It provides a common educational basis for all who attended it. Since basic education (*Tarbiyya*) was usually imbued with a religious spirit, and its professed goal was to produce a true believer, whose officials also provided further instruction. The Quran was studied in all the *maktabs*, with stress laid on memorizing and absolute accuracy. Some calligraphy and a smattering of arithmetic were taught in some *maktabs* in Turkey and Iran where Islamic history and fragments of Persian poetry were included from the thirteenth century. The *Maktab's* curriculum laid a basic foundation for further Study. The *maktab* still survives today in many parts of the Islamic world. Its purpose is to teach reading and writing and, more specifically, the principles of Islam. Historically, boys and girls are taught in mosque schools as well as in private homes. (Zaman, 2001) Within the Islamic tradition, children are taught to revere both for the teacher and the subject matter. Talented students are identified at an early age and encouraged to further studies. The *maktab* historically served not only as the source of basic education for the general population, but as a conduit for the academically talented places to centers of advanced learning (Sen, 2002). Although there are regional variations in the actual conduct of educating children, the overall influence of the *maktab* historically has been the way it shapes the attitudes of students toward their teachers, and the sanctity of learning. These attitudes inevitably were carried on by students into the more advanced phases of instruction, and eventually permeated the societal values of Islamic culture. (Sen, 2002)

A Madrasah, is an Islamic college, literally a "place of instruction in religious law. In Medieval usage the term referred to an institution providing intermediate and advanced instruction in Islamic law and related subjects. As a rule, the medieval Madrasah served male students who were past the elementary level and who intended to acquire credentials as *ulama*, religious scholars. A typical Islamic Madrasah contained rooms

for students, a prayer hall, and classrooms for one or more professors, literary and sanitary facilities. It was usually attached to a mosque, and large mosque compliances, but it appeared as a separate institution in about the eleventh century and evolved from the informal schools that operated in mosques or teacher's home. It was a dominant form of higher learning,

A Madrasah was legally a *waqf*, charitable endowment. The founder would donate property, from whose proceeds the Madrasah was built and maintained. The founder's instruction governed such matters as the legal school to which the professor would belong. The Madrasah education was intended to teach the students how to deduce religious law from authoritative Islamic text. The students who went through the whole course were qualified to be judges and religious scholars, but some students dropped out earlier, becoming mosque imams or pursuing secular careers with the added prestige of religious education. The method of instruction was scholastic and dialectical, intense debate about the interpretation and difficulties of standard text books. Usually students committed Quran by rote and a fair amount of Arabic students studied Arabic, logic and the core subjects of Islamic religious sciences- Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), Quranic interpretation, and the hadith (traditions of the Prophet) Better students went on to study *Usul-i-Fiqh* (Principles of jurisprudence) along with theology, philosophy mathematics, astronomy and sometimes medicine. But the Madrasahs were not the only institutions through which higher learning was imparted. During the Islamic period of Indian history, the Madrasahs were generally considered more popular and important centres of higher learning.

Muslims in Sri Lanka form a religious minority community in a predominantly Buddhist country. Today an estimated 9.6% of the total population are Muslims, making Islam the fourth religion to be practiced in Sri Lanka. Over two million Muslims live scattered throughout the country with a higher concentration in few districts, namely: Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee in the Eastern province and Colombo in Western province of Sri Lanka. However, they do not constitute an absolute majority (50%) in any of these districts. It is striking to note that Muslims in Sri Lanka organize themselves along some Islamic institutions but primarily around mosques. Historically, these mosques played a very important role in their lives. The history of mosque in Sri Lanka is as old as the presence of Muslims themselves in the country. C.W. Nicholas, and S. Paranavitana (1961) stated "The modern definitive history of Sri Lanka noted that by the end of the 8th century there were communities of Muslims at seaports including Colombo, now the metropolis". During the last few decades, a considerable number of mosques have been established in each city where Muslims live. Today, there are about 2000 registered mosques in Sri Lanka including *jum'ah* mosques and other ordinary mosques (Jazeel & Zulkiple, 2013).

In Sri Lanka, it is said that every early Muslim settlement had its mosque along with *maktab* or madrasah. The indigenous madrasah system was flourished due to direct

influence of Indian rich tradition and trends of madrasah education during the Middle Ages and after. More specially, Muslim community found the madrasah as source of education during the colonial period from 1505 to 1948. For the Muslims, that the aim of these schools established by colonial powers was proselytism. Towards the latter part of the 19th century, madrasah education in Sri Lanka most likely connected with the establishment of mosques.

2. Method

The main purpose of the study was to explore educational programme of the mosque. This research study is based on the mix method of quantitative and qualitative. This study mainly used the analysis of data that collected using the interview survey from 218 randomly selected mosques. Moreover, analysis of in-depth interviews conducted among the experts, activists and Muslim scholars along with field notes of the observation were applied as a supplementary.

3. Results and Discussion

The one of important programmes the mosque in Sri Lanka is its operation as the centre for Islamic education. Therefore it can be assumed that the mosques are educational institution to a certain extent. However, they seem to confine their educational objectives to a set of narrow objectives to solely religious goals. Moreover, they appear less use of educational procedures. The analysis of data obtained from the interview survey indicates that *qur'ân madrasah* (school) for teaching how to recite the *qur'ân* is regular establishment in great majority of the mosques (88%). About two in five mosques (39%) are getting involved in the programmes such as *qur'ân* memorization or *tajwîd* classes with moderate regularity. Accurately half of *tan'ôid* mosques (50%) and exactly two out of five non-affiliated general mosques as well *shâfi'î* mosques (40% and 41%) engage in this practice. Relatively few mosques (18%) periodically conduct classes on Islamic study or Arabic Language. In comparison, the involvement of some *jum'ah* mosque (33%) and less than half of *tan'ôid* mosques (39%) in this activity is remarkable.

Qur'ân madrasah is regarded as an elementary Islamic educational institute in Sri Lanka from the early period and continue its function even today. Muslim children are admitted to quranic study in the mosques or small schools attached to mosques. They are trained to learn and pronounce the Arabic alphabets in order to facilitate them the reciting of *qur'ân*. Sometimes the children were taught about the basic principles and fundamentals of Islam such as prayer. These schools and curriculum are often called *maktab* rather than as *madrasah*. The Islamic educational tradition indicates that *Kuttab* or *maktab* is in operation from early Islamic period. However, historians are uncertain as to when the *katatib* were first established. But with the widespread desire of the faithful to study the Quran, *katatib* could be found in virtually every part of the Islamic empire by the middle of the eighth century. The *kuttab* served a vital social function as the only vehicle for formal public instruction for

primary-age children and continued so until Western models of education were introduced in the modern period.

Muslim children attend these schools for a period of one or two hours beside secular education on weekdays, before or after school hours and on the weekends. Ideally, this elementary education is cheap or free of charge, but in fact the teachers receive donations on an irregular basis. Furthermore, until recently gifts of money and betel were ceremonially offered to the teacher at the beginning of a course by the parents on a special day. This custom, though continued to be practiced by some families, is not very common nowadays, as it has obviously been branded as 'non-Islamic' by certain groups. Generally teachers of these *madrasas* are *lebbe* or *mawlanis*, most of them who also double as *imâm* of the particular mosques.

The program of *Tahfîz al-qur'ân* (Memorization of *Al-Qur'ân*) and *Tajwîd* is more likely offered to kids and others who are interested by mostly the permanent *imâm* of the mosque. Otherwise one or two learnt *ulamâ* voluntarily or with partial payment conduct the such classes. The objective is to produce individual *bafîz al-qur'ân*. The classes are mostly on part time basis, after *maghrib* or *subh* prayers. However, there are few *madrasas* established and run by mosques in its premises or nearby building to offer study programme on *tajwîd* and memorizing the *qur'ân* with a prescribed systematic learning system and syllabi. There are few mosques function to conduct fulltime classes with other facilities such as student hostel. The mosques most likely follow the same way in offering courses on Islamic studies and Arabic language. All these *madrasas* usually take the form of formal lectures delivered in the mosque.

Apart from this there are very few Arabic institutions directly managed by the mosque people. Historically, it is believed that the *madrasah* in a broad sense has a continuous history in Sri Lanka and their influence on the Muslim community have always been vital, pervasive and persuasive. It was most likely as an integrated part of the mosque. M.M.M. Mahroof (1987) discusses "The Muslim settlements in Sri Lanka had, from the earliest period.the religious organization had a very important place. Every settlement had its mosques and the *madrasas*, the religious functionaries most often functioning as preceptors" Mahroof, 1973).

The role of *madrasah* during the colonial period was monumental. It could hardly flourish but were able to survive because it mostly co-existed with the *jum'ah* mosque, and thus it could preserve Muslim heritage and their Islamic identity. It is praiseworthy to note that this *madrasah* considerably, fulfills Muslim educational needs and aspiration during this period, particularly when they stood aloof from any involvement with the secular education which the British established and encouraged. It is observed that, "Little or no secular instruction is imparted in them; their import essentially is to impart knowledge of the Koran; the children are sent to them not to learn what is useful, but to fulfill a religious obligation" (Mahroof, 1973).

Actually the *qur'ân madrasab* tradition paved the way to establish Arabic institutions in Sri Lanka, for higher learning of the Islamic studies. It is also in hand with the establishment or re-establishment of mosques. This is facilitated by that *mawlawis* who had to attach themselves to a mosque as *khamîb*, *pesh imâm* or *lebbe* and could start the *qur'ân* classes, where they taught *qur'ânic* recitation. It is true that primary objective of the *madrasab* was and still now to accomplish religious education. Religious education is critical to the enhancement and strengthening of one's faith, correct understanding of Islamic teachings and Muslims' adaptability to practice Islam in a minority country like Sri Lanka. These *Madrasas* play an important role in educating and molding young Muslim children who attend government schools. Their role is to provide basic Islamic education to young children so that they would have sufficient knowledge and skills to practice their duties and responsibilities as Muslims.

This is inspired by Islamic tradition that the mosques from Islamic formative period were the natural places to learn about religious education and it was spread throughout the Muslims world. The first school connected with a mosque, was set up at Medeenah in 653, whilst the first one in Damascus dates from 744, and by 900 nearly every mosque had an elementary school for the education for both boys and girls. The basic format of mosque education was the study circle, better known in Islam as '*halaqât al-ilm*' or in brief: *halaqa* that is defined as 'a gathering of people seated in a circle,' or, 'gathering of students around a teacher (Encyclopedia of Islam, 1994). Visiting scholars were allowed to sit beside the lecturer as a mark of respect, and in many *halaqât* a special section was always reserved for visitors.

Children usually started schooling at the age of five years, one of the first lessons in writing was to learn how to write the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God and simple verses from the *qur'ân*. After the rudiments of reading and writing were mastered, the *qur'ân* was then studied thoroughly and arithmetic was added. For those who wanted to study further, the larger mosques, where education was more advanced, offered instruction in Arabic grammar and poetry, logic, algebra, biology, history, law, and theology. Teaching and learning in most large mosques became according to Mackensen, (Zaimeche, 2002) 'a full fledged profession and the mosque school took on the semblance of an academy or even a university later on. So as important centres of higher learning, indeed, that many of them still exist today as the oldest universities in the world. Amongst these, Al-Qayrawwan and Al-Zaytuna in Tunisia, Al-Azhar in Egypt, and Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco. As places of renown, they attracted great names of Muslim scholars, either students, or teachers, or both.

It is obvious that in the early Islamic era, the mosque was used for the teaching of one or more of the Islamic sciences and literary arts, but after the mid ninth century, more and more came to be devoted to the legal sciences. Scientific subjects were also delivered; astronomy and engineering were included at Al-Azhar, medicine at Al-Azhar and the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Egypt. At the Qarawiyyin, there were courses

on grammar, rhetoric, logic, elements of mathematics and astronomy, and possibly history, geography and elements of chemistry. At Qayrawwan and Zaytuna in Tunisia, alongside the *Qur'an* and jurisprudence, students were taught grammar, mathematics, astronomy and medicine (Zaimeche, 2002).

At Qayrawwan, in particular, classes in medicine were delivered by Ziad ibn Khalfun, Ishak ibn Imran and Ishak ibn Sulayman, whose works were subsequently, translated by Constantine the African in the 11th century. They were taught in the first faculty of medicine in Europe: Salerno, in the South of Italy, which became the first institution of higher learning in Latin Europe. At the Mosque of Amr, the Muslim traveler-geographer Al-Muqaddasi from Jerusalem reports that between the two evening prayers, the mosque was crowded with classes in law, the *Qur'an*, literature and wisdom (philosophy or ethics). Whilst in Iraq, pharmacology, engineering, astronomy and other subjects were taught in the mosques of Baghdad, and students came from Syria, Persia and India to learn these sciences (Zaimeche, 2002).

4. Conclusion

Education is essential to the human and social development. The Islamic textual resources consider the knowledge and education as pre-requisite to make the social change and development. The historical experiences clearly demonstrate the commitments of Islam and its people to acquisition and spread of the knowledge among the people. Thus, the education was indispensable programme of the mosques from early Islamic period. Influenced by this established Practice, mosques in Sri Lanka have been the educational programmes from the presence in Sri Lanka. However, the mosque educational programmes seems to be confined with religious education. The vast majority of the mosque operate the *Qur'an* madrasah to instruct or train the young to recite the *Qur'an* along with providing basic knowledge on Islamic principles to them. Some mosques extend the scope to include *hifz* and *tajweed* classes and few of them operate madrasah education for advanced studies. The education is first axis for development and progress. Therefore, the mosque can play a role in a wider scope in relation to the education of the Muslim community in a minority context.

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