

Islamic Philosophy of Education and the Indian Madrasahs: Continuity and Change*

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Islam is a historical religion and a social creed. It has its own philosophies on life, human civilization, material culture, spiritualism and religious institutions. Islam is neither a mere schedule of prayer and fasting nor a blank and unmeaningful relationship between the creator and the created. As a monolithic theocracy it presents a monolithic delineation of the good life. Islam aims at the full efflorescence of human faculties and individual potentialities. It thus embraces a complete code of life.

I

Kasb-i-'ilm or quest for knowledge is one of the fundamental tenets of Islamic thought. The concept *'ilm* equals in depth of meaning and importance to the doctrine of *tawheed* (or oneness of God) that is the essence of the very faith of Islam. Islam has laid the greatest possible emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge and learning. It is one of the most essential ordinances of God. Hence, cultivation of knowledge is regarded as one of the sacred acts of worship in Islam.

The Islamic philosophy of education has come out of the holy Quran and the traditions of the Prophet—the two immutable sources of Islamic thought. The Quran is embellished with verses emphasizing the importance of knowledge and exhorting man to cultivate it. The word *'ilm* (knowledge) and its derivatives have occurred 805 times in the Quran. The very first five verses revealed to the Prophet commanded him to read and learn. The Quran says:

* This paper was presented at the 20th World Conference of Philosophy held in Boston, USA, in August, 1998. The main theme of the Congress was "Philosophy Educating Humanity".

Read in the name of thy Lord who created man from a clot (of blood). Read and thy Lord is the most Bounteous who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not (96:1-5)

There are other verses also which highlight the value of knowledge and learning. Two such verses are:

And say! My Lord! Increase me in knowledge (20:119).
Those of them who would investigate it would have known it (4:93).

At one place while praising the lofty character of the Prophet God has upheld the dignity of education by swearing by the pen. The Quran says:

By the pen and that which they write, thou art not,
for thy Lord's favour unto thee, a madman (96:1-2).

It is noteworthy that God had sworn by the pen in days when Arabs were semi-civilized and boasted of their swords.

The prophet of Islam who called himself Madinat-ul-'ilm (the city of knowledge) greatly emphasized the value of knowledge and learning. He said :

To seek knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim. Search after knowledge even if it be in China.

Whoever has spent a dirham (a small coin) on the cultivation of knowledge has spent, as if, plenty of wheat grains of red gold in the path of Allah.

Knowledge is a treasure house and its key is enquiry.¹

The Quran and the traditions of the Prophet thus establish that:

1. Acquisition of knowledge and learning is one of the fundamental duties of every Muslim (man and woman)
2. Journey should be taken to distant places, even to foreign countries, for acquiring knowledge
3. Money should be spent on imparting and acquiring education even if it be very meagre in amount.

The philosophy of education is an integral part of the philosophy of life. "The answer to every educational problem is ultimately influenced by our philosophy of life. The aim of education is relative of the aim of life."² Islam has its own philosophy of life. The Quran says:

(we) created man out of mixed semen
(male and female) so that (we) can put him to trial, and hence gave
him the senses to hear and see (for perception and observation) (76:2)

Here the objective of the creation of human being is to put him on trial. Man has been endowed with the sense of perception and observation. Islam desires from its followers conscious subjugation and total and willing submission to God. The concept of *tawheed* (oneness of God) teaches man not to fear any element of nature such as the sun, moon, stars, sea, mountain, fire, air, tree, animal, etc. but to fear God alone who is almighty and the creator of all. Entire nature is second to man. Islam thus raised the status of human being from being fearful of nature to being the master of nature. The whole universe is there for man to conquer and master. Islam, therefore assigned man a position supreme in creation, banished fear from his heart and urged him to conquer the universe.³ Islam thus offered a rational approach to life. Here is the origin of the Islamic philosophy of education to investigate into the secrets of nature and conquer the universe, at the same time willingly and completely submitting oneself to the supreme creator.

The quest for knowledge and the spirit of investigation and enquiry exhorted the followers of Islam in the middle ages to learn all branches of natural and physical science. The Muslim scientists learnt the Greek, Iranian and Indian sciences and later transmitted them to Europe where Renaissance dawned in the 14th century.

On the other hand, the philosophy of *tawheed*, which demanded willing and total submission to God gave birth to the concept of *taqwa* or pious conduct, This raised questions such as:

What is the relation of man to God ?

What is the right mode of living ?

How to distinguish between *halal* and *haram* or permitted and prohibited ?

These questions led to the development of Islamic jurisprudence and deeply influenced the shaping of the Islamic philosophy of education. The doctors of Islamic jurisprudence in the middle ages had different views on education. Imam Abu Hanifa (d. 767) said that education meant understanding how to distinguish between right and wrong with regard to both this world and hereafter. He stressed on reason and scholastic studies. But Imam Shafaii (769-819) became a

traditionalist. He was against scholasticism and believed education was concerned with the sanctity of human life, and spiritualism. Ibn Jumaa, a thinker of the Shafaii school, regarded education as a medium for drawing people nearer to God.⁴

Imam Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), one of the towering philosophers of Islam, revived the rational approach to education. He stressed on learning all the useful branches of science that could help in understanding one's relationship with God. In fact, his philosophy of education was based on the principle of the unity and importance of man and his harmony with the creator. His concept was a combination of the rational sciences and dogmatic theology or a synthesis of '*aql*' (reason) and '*naql*' (tradition). On the one hand, he advocated the inclusion of industrial subjects, weaving, agriculture, tailoring, as also mathematics, medicine and other rational and useful sciences in the curriculum; on the other, he put emphasis on the understanding of and investigation into dogmatic knowledge based on the Quran and the traditions. In his view both rational and dogmatic studies were essential for the betterment of the individual and society.⁵

In this way, before the establishment of Muslim rule in India Islam had already developed its philosophy of education. But from the 12th century Islam entered into a long phase of commotion, conflict and stagnation. There was a lack of enforcement of the study of creative sciences in the Islamic world from 12th century onwards. The intermingling of Islamic beliefs and thoughts with Greek and Hindu philosophies opened up new currents of thought that gave birth to several factions and ideologies which ultimately shunned the cultivation of the scientific attitude. On the other hand, the political unrest during the Abbasids, the growth of schisms in Islamic polity, the rise of the Ismaili movement, and finally the Mongol invasion completely shattered the progressive environment of rationalism. Consequently, conservatism, traditionalism and dogmatism became a refuge for the people.

II

This was the state of affairs when the Sultanate rule was founded in India. The Sultanate period, for our study, may be divided into two sections: pre-Lodi and Lodi.

During the pre-Lodi period *manqul* or theological learning covered

the larger part of the syllabus. *Tafsir* (exegesis), *Hadith* (traditions) and *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) were the main subjects taught under *maqulat* while *Mantiq* (Logic) and *Kalam* (Rhetoric) were only two subjects under *maqulat* or rational sciences. Though there was no passion for rational science yet there was no dearth of scholars on the subject. Some scholars had sufficient mastery over arithmetic, astrology and music, and a few had learnt Sanskrit also. Prominent among them were Amir Khusru, Shaikh Ali Haideri, Shaikh Inayatullah and Mulla Daud. However, dogmatic theology dominated the curriculum.⁶ The reason for this was that the socio-political structure which was imported into this country required to be consolidated. And this could be done largely by the Qazis and Muftis who had to interpret Islamic law in the Indian environment.

The Lodi period assumed an important landmark in the evolution of madrasah education. Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517) took keen interest in the cultivation of learning. He established madrasahs in all parts of his kingdom. Other provincial governments also opened such madrasahs. Apart from Delhi and the adjoining areas several madrasahs came up in Bihar, Bengal, Gujarat, Malwa, Khandesh and the Deccan. Sikandar Lodi invited scholars from Arabia, Persia and Central Asia, and encouraged them to settle in India.⁷

Prominent among the scholars who visited India during this period were two brothers from Multan, Shaikh Abdullah (d. 1516) and Shaikh Azizullah (d. 1525), both specialists in *maqulat*. The former imparted education in Delhi while the latter was sent to Sambhal. Another Multani scholar was Maulana Shamsuddin. He also was an expert in rational science. These foreign scholars popularized rational sciences and introduced new books in the curriculum, such as *Sharh-i-Muta'la*, *Sharh-i-Hikmat-i-Arabia*, *Sharh-i-Muafiq* and *Mutawwal* on rhetoric and philosophy, while *Sharh-i-Shamsiya* and *Sharh-i-Sahaif* which were well recognized books on logic and scholasticism were already included in the syllabus. Besides, *Mathnavi* of Maulana Rum and *Fusus-ul-Hikmah* of Muhiuddin Ibn Arabi (1164-1240) were popular among the Muslims and Hindus equally. They contained reasoning and philosophical discussion in verse and prose respectively.

Thus there was an attempt to rationalize the madrasah education during the Lodi period. As a result of this rationalization the Hindus, particularly the Kayasths, took to the study of the Persian language and literature.⁸

III

The establishment of the Mughal rule provided a fresh spurt to rational and secular sciences. Babur and Humayun were scholars of high order. Humayun was well versed in mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, geometry, geography and astrology. His exile in Persia and recovery of the Indian kingdom with the help of Persia led to an exodus of Persian scholars to this country. Akbar took keen interest in remodelling the curriculum. His philosophy of secular state polity was reflected in the courses of study. Akbar thought it pertinent to utilize the potentialities of the local Hindu population in the consolidation of the Mughal Empire. Hence he emphasized the recasting of the madrasah syllabus. At his behest subjects like arithmetic, mensuration, geometry, physiognomy, astronomy, accountancy, public administration, history and agriculture were added to the existing ones.

Among the Persian scholars who visited Mughal India the name of Mir Fathullah Shirazi, a living encyclopaedia of the time, was eminent. First he came to Bijapur and then to Agra in 1582. He was an expert in the field of rational and mechanical sciences. He invented a looking glass, new matchlocks, and improved the Mughal gunnery. He brought to India some famous works on liberal sciences by the contemporary scholars of Iran and Khorasan, and introduced them in the curriculum. These works were of Muhaqqiq Dawwani (d. 1512), Mir Sadrullah (d. 1640), Mir Ghiyas Mansur (d. 1541/2) and Mirza Jaan. Some Persian scholars like Hakim Kamran (d. 1640), Dastur and Hirabad also took keen interest in the cultivation of rational sciences. On the other hand, Tafseer, Hadith and Fiqh were retained as they served the theological needs of the Muslim society and the state. Shaikh Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlawi (1551-1642) and Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703-1762) were the two top theologians of the Mughal period.

The result of Akbar's liberal educational policy was that many Hindus flocked to the madrasahs and learnt the Persian language and literature as well as the rational sciences. Hence, the Hindu society produced a large number of poets, historians, and even lexicographers. Some of the Hindu scholars excelled in the rational sciences and were appointed as teachers in the madrasahs.⁹

The educational policy of Akbar was maintained by his successors. Jahangir and Shahjahan, who followed the state policy of Akbar and had a liberal attitude towards the cultivation of education, did not interfere with the existing curriculum. Aurangzeb, having a streak of

orthodoxy, discouraged the arts and music, but the other subjects of maqalat remained untouched.¹⁰

IV

The decline of the Mughal Empire gave a fillip to the rise of regional forces. The quasi-independent Nawabs and Rajas in Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad, Mysore and Punjab gave fresh vigour and spirit to madrasah education. The scholars and teachers who had received rewards and patronage from the Mughal rulers, princes, nobles and other members of royalty left Delhi and flocked to the different provinces where new madrasahs came up. The curriculum of these madrasahs had sufficient tilt towards maqalat with some modifications. It became fashionable to maintain some maquli maulvis, poets and other literary personages in the court of these Nawabs and Rajas. Even Hindu Rajas such as those of Alwar, Patiala, Jaipur and Kashmir invited maquli scholars to their courts to discuss various aspects of philosophy and other subjects.¹¹

In the second half of the 18th century there was an effort to systemize the madrasah curriculum. Mulla Nizamuddin Sihalwi (d. 1748) of Awadh was the spirit behind it. He expanded the existing syllabus giving more coverage to maqalat. The courses of Arabic grammar, logic, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and rhetoric were widened, Fiqh, Usul-i-Fiqh, Hadith and Tafseer, however, continued as usual. This new syllabus came to be known as Dars-i-Nizami and was adopted later by almost all the madrasahs in India.¹² The chief merit of this new syllabus was that it was more flexible and useful than before as it laid emphasis on the courses of study and not on the books.

V

At the turn of the 19th century the madrasah pattern of education had to face two new challenges—first, the anti-Islamic work of Christian missionaries; and second, the challenge of modern science and technology. The establishment of Christian missionary centres in various parts of the country, works of scholars with missionary zeal, such as Dr. Pfander's *Mizanu'l Haqq* and William Muir's *Life of Mahomet*, and the introduction of missionary books in the school curriculum injected doubts in the minds of Muslims against the intentions of the British Government. Muslims thought that the Christian missionary's "spiritual struggle against Islam"¹³ would corrode their faith and culture. This

resulted in the rise of revivalist movements like Muahidin, Faraizi and others. The Quran and Hadith assumed central position in Muslim minds. Imarat-i-shariahs were founded to shield Islamic faith and culture against the onslaught of western culture. On the other hand, regeneration of the mystic tradition gained momentum. At the same time, the ulema and the laity urged the Muslims to be consonant with contemporary socio-political demands. Maulvi Abdul Hayy (1848-86) of Firangi Mahal issued a fatwa in favour of the English language. A number of new madrasahs came up. They were: Darul Ulum (Deoband, 1866) Mazahir-ul-Ulum (Saharanpur, 1866) Jamia Mansabiya (Merut, 1878), Jamia Nazmia (Lucknow, 1890) Jamia Mazharul Ulum (Varanasi, 1893) and Nadwat-ul-Ulama (Lucknow, 1894) etc.

One of the chief aims of these madrasahs was to combat the propaganda of the Christian missionaries against Islam. Some of these madrasahs, specially Deoband group, tried to boost the morale of the Muslims by "encouraging a sense of moral superiority", emphasizing "the centrality of the religious law" and developing "a style of psychological resistance to the British culture."¹⁴

Sir Syed Ahmad (1817-98), the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (1875), felt the pulse of the time. He worked to remove the corrosive element from contemporary Islam. He wrote a commentary on the Quran emphasizing its rational teachings, correlating them with the prevailing crisis in Muslim behaviour.¹⁵ He tried to refurbish the Muslim mind so that they could shed their rigidity against western knowledge.

VI

In independent India the madrasah pattern of education needed a reorientation. After partition the Indian Muslims felt shaky. The call for cultural synthesis, bringing of Muslims into the mainstream of national life, and the question of the preservation of Islamic heritage demanded a reconstruction of the Muslim outlook. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a product of the madrasah education and the first Education Minister of India, reinvigorated the Muslims by his philosophy of education. Issues of *Al-Hilal* contained essays on Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot and other modern thinkers. Rousseauistic ideas on the natural growth of the child's mind were stressed. Azad emphasized the linking of education to the prevailing needs of society and the nation. A firm believer in Islamic creed he voiced the unity of

mankind.¹⁶ He criticized the Dars-i-Nizami which was confined to the philosophy of the medieval period and urged a revision of the madrasah curriculum by introducing modern philosophies, mathematics and sciences. It was Azad's thought that resulted in the transformation of the madrasah curriculum. Deoband and some other madrasahs introduced new courses like English, Hindi, history, geography, general science, general knowledge, civics, economics, modern philosophy, etc. Book-oriented teaching has been replaced in some of these madrasahs by the lecture method.¹⁷

In the last few decades some madrasahs of the Deoband group have started imparting training in the arts and crafts like book-binding, tailoring, leather-work, and wiremanship. Recently some madrasahs have introduced computer training also. Now the Government of India and the state governments are patronizing madrasah education. The Government of Bihar has formed the Madrasah Council to streamline the madrasah education and the maulvis of such madrasahs are paid salary from the state treasury. Very recently the Government of Uttar Pradesh has launched a scheme to upgrade 168 madrasahs in the province. Under this scheme hundred per cent salary of teachers will be borne by the government. And the Central Government of India has released a sum of Rs. 82 lakh for the modernization of madrasahs in Uttar Pradesh.¹⁸ The BJP, an influential national party has also adopted a resolution demanding immediate recognition for madrasah education by the Central Government. The leaders of the Party sought a uniform curriculum for madrasah education throughout the country.¹⁹

To sum up, the Islamic philosophy of education originating from the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet, was expounded by the Hanafi and Shafaii schools of thought and given a final shape by Al-Ghazali. The proper and harmonious synthesis of *'aql* and *naql*, and the spirit of free investigation became the ideology of Islamic madrasahs. In India, the syllabus of theology remained unchanged throughout history. Even today some very old books and commentaries on the Hadith and Fiqh form the courses of study. But maqulat underwent several modifications from time to time to suit the changing ideology of the state and the needs of contemporary society. During the Mughal period the madrasahs operated to serve the state by attracting, better human stock and augmenting individual potentialities. During the British period it aimed at preserving Islamic creed and combating the onslaught of western culture. In independent India the madrasahs

are being transformed in consonance with the national ideology and challenging socio-economic realities. The Islamic philosophy of education is thus assuming a tinge of change in the Indian environment.

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