

Education in Medieval Bengal: A Study in Cross-Cultural Influences

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ABSTRACT

In the medieval Bengal, Hindus and Muslims lived in a society where mainly the religion controlled foremost aspects of life. In this context, both the communities maintained two distinct educational systems in Bengal. This paper attempts to present the emergence of Islamic education in Bengal during Sultanate period and its development in relation to the indigenous education of the Hindus. It also examines interactions of Islamic education with its Hindu counterpart in the period under review despite having clear distinctions across the communities in many respects. Analyzing the primary and secondary sources on education of Medieval Bengal, this paper shows how the Hindus and Muslims interacted with each other in the field of education went beyond the existing hostility, mistrust and prejudices in many aspects of their distinctive life styles. The result was the development of a unique syncretic and composite culture in the field of Education.

Key words: Medieval Bengal, Muslims, Hindus, *Pathsala*, *Tol*, *Maktab*, *Madrasa*.

Introduction:

Education is the only mechanism that enhances the process of social, economic, and cultural development of communities. Islam in pre-colonial Bengal was considered a “civilization building ideology.”¹ The religious authority was possessed by hundreds of mosques and shrines that were established along with the delta. Islam had identified with the local culture and was associated with Bengal’s agrarian expansion.

The Bengal identity in Pre-Colonial Period

Undivided Bengal includes modern day Bangladesh, West Bengal, Tripura and Assam’s Karimganj district. Bengal, comprising modern Bangladesh and West Bengal of India, was considered an important part of Eastern India in the medieval period. Before the advent of the Muslims in this land no ruler had connotated Bangala or Bengal in the sense of a country. It was then divided into so many Janapadas or principalities over which the rulers of various dynasties ruled. On the eve of Muslim conquest in the Sena period, Bengal is said to have been divided into five principalities of Barendra (the Barind of Muslim historians)², Radha, Banga, Bagdi and Mithila,³ possibly in consideration of the natural barriers and river courses. It was sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah (1339-1358 A.D.) who united all the administrative divisions of Lakhnawati, Satgaon and Sonargaon, and various Janapadas into a compact country, which became widely known as Bangala (the Bengal referred to above).⁴ The north west portion of Bengal is comparatively drier and higher land than the south and eastern portions. This facilitated the horse riding people of Turkish race to start their conquest and administrative set up from this convenient zone of Bengal. We, therefore, find that the Lakhnawati kingdom was conquered by Ghazi Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad b. Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1204 A.D., and gradually comprising the whole of Bengal it emerged as an independent Sultanate in Eastern India. Bengal as a country consisted of the vast region from Teliagarhi pass in the west to Chittagong in the east and from the foot of the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the South.⁵

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 ⁶. 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.

Muslim Education in Sub-Continent:

In 13th century Muslims came to Sub-Continent with 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 Quran. A Maktab was like a primary school which had only one teacher. Maktab were commonly established in mosques where prayer leader (Maulvi) also served as teacher. 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. ⁷

Content and course of education:

It is very difficult to determine the content and course of education accurately in the educational institutions mentioned above in the period under study. Sifting materials from various sources we may give some ideas about the syllabi and contents of education which were followed in those institutions. The Muslim children, as beginners, started their primary course in the maktab⁸ and in the mosque. The maktab were generally attached to the mosques,⁹ and sometimes they were run by the well-to-do persons in their homes. Muslim boys and girls are expected to start saying prayers at the age of seven.¹⁰ They require at least two years to acquire knowledge of their obligatory prayers and other related rituals. It may, therefore, be presumed that at the age of five they started their educational career in the makatib and masjid. It was customary to start with bismillah ceremony of a boy or girl at the age of four years, four months and four days.¹¹ In any case, we may hold that in between the age of four and five years the Muslim boys and girls were required to attend the makatib for their primary education. In exceptional cases the age may have exceeded five and extended upto seven.¹²

Fiqh or elementary knowledge of jurisprudence is pre-requisite for performing the obligatory duties of Islam. The subject was, therefore, included in the courses of study at the primary level. Nam-i-Haq¹³ a work on fiqh in elegant Persian, supposed to be a contribution of Muslim Bengal to Islamic learning, supports the contention of introducing the fiqh into the courses of study at the primary and higher levels as well. In the light of this observation, it is not, therefore, unreasonable to conjecture that the Qur'an, Hadith and Fiqh formed the main subjects of study in the makatib and masjid of Bengal at the primary level. Along with these subjects, Arabic, Persian and Bengali as languages were taught to the students in the primary stage of their educational career. Arabic as being the language of the Qur'an should have been learnt by the students. The epigraphs¹⁴ of the Bengal Sultanate testify to the cultivation of Arabic learning by the Muslim rulers in the period under review. Persian being the court language¹⁵ was similarly given importance for study in the makatib and masjid in the elementary courses. Religious books were also written in Persian. The students were, therefore, required to learn Persian to have access to the books written in Persian. The accounts of the Chinese envoys in the 15th and 16th centuries A.D. regarding nobles and courtiers' proficiency in Persian and Bangali¹⁶ support the contention.

The students after completion of the primary education in the makatib and masjid would proceed to the madaris for higher education. The madaris (institutions of higher learning) provided higher education for the advanced students. Advanced learning would, no doubt, be a continuation of the primary education. It is, therefore, possible that an analytical study of the Qur'an and Hadith formed the principal part of the advanced courses. Tafsir of the Qur'an and Tashrih of the Hadith belonged to this category.

Besides these subjects, other sciences such as logic, arithmetic, medicine, alchemy, hindasa (geometry), astronomy and others were also taught in the madaris. Though of later period, the statement of Abu'l Fadl confirms this. He writes, "Every boy ought to read books on morals, arithmetic, agriculture, mensuration, geometry, astronomy, physiognomy, household matters, rules of governmental, medicine, logic, higher mathematics, science and history, all of which may gradually be acquired."¹⁷ The madaras for advanced studies kept provisions for all these subjects for the students. But they were not required to study each and every subject. There had been different grades of madaris on the basis of the subjects taught in them. Anatomy as a branch of medical science was considered a subject of study in the madaris of first grade. In an epigraph Jalal al-Din Fath Shah (1481-1486 A.D.) is designated as kashif or interpreter of the secrets of the

Qur'an and 'alim or learned in the knowledge of religions and bodies.¹⁸ These connotations, ascribed to the sultan, substantiate the view of introducing the tafsir (commentary of the Qur'an), comparative study of religions and the science of anatomy in the madaris of higher learning.

Sultan Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah was an archer,¹⁹ and archery formed an important technique in the art of warfare.²⁰ Archery, therefore, seemed to have been taught to those interested in it, in the academy of higher learning. Hidayat-i-Rami,²¹ a book on archery compiled by Muhammad Buda'i better known as Sayyid Mir 'Alawi in the reign of 'Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah supports the contention.

During the Muslim period, there was provision of vocational, technical and professional education. The individuals began to acquire education, on the basis of their skills, abilities and interests. During this period, the individuals were engaged in number of occupations, these include, silk weaving, carpentry, pottery making, dyeing, artworks, handicrafts, working with metals, precious stones, production of garments, jewellery etc. The Mughal emperors took keen interest in artworks and handicrafts. The Mughal paintings are famous even in the present existence. The fine fabrics, shawls, painted wares and gold and silver ornaments of India were the outcomes of professional, technical and vocational education. The individuals, who are engaged in the manufacturing and production of these items, need to possess adequate knowledge and skills. They should possess sufficient awareness regarding how to make use of machines and tools to generate productivity. The commencement of vocational education began with the initiation of the religious ceremony. The main feature of this curriculum is that it included knowledge of both religious and secular subjects. There theology, logic, philosophy, history, mathematics, astronomy, grammar, hadith, Islamic law, tafsir etc. were significant. Surprisingly, according to the curriculum written for Muslims, Hindus also studied. Before the arrival of the Muslims, the education system of Hindu society in the subcontinent was limited to Brahmins. Low caste Hindus were denied access to any form of knowledge. During the rule of the Muslim rulers, the neglected Hindus were freed from the clutches of the privileged Hindus. They progress on the path of intellectual development. The tax-free land that Muslim rulers used to donate to support education was also given to Hindu educational institutions. Dewan Fazle Rabi (1849-1917) of the Murshidabad Estate mentioned five types of lakheraj property in use for Hindus. In short, Muslim rulers contributed more than any non-Muslim ruler in the subcontinent to the expansion of education among common Hindus.²² The more surprising news is that sometimes the Muslim Maktab and the Hindu classroom were sitting under the same roof! 'Munsi' in the morning and 'Guru' in the afternoon would teach their students²³.

Condition of Women's Education

There was co-education for both the boys and girls at primary level in the Maktabas. But in the Madrasah and Majilis, there was no arrangement for co-education or separate education for the women. The aristocratic Muslim families used to establish private educational arrangements for the women of their families. Thus, the higher education for women was limited to the aristocratic, royal, higher and high-middle class families only. Sometimes, the teachers used to go to the private houses and teach the girls individually. So the number of educated women was limited his developed system and policy obviously can contribute to improve the present educational system of the country, while it has been facing several challenges. The present educational system is seriously lagging behind in moral development of the learners, mainly because of disintegration with religious teachings, while the past system developed combining together religious and general courses, which successfully produced morally developed citizens for the country.

The present system makes the learners and teachers bounded by hundreds of rules and obligations, which seriously loses enthusiasm in learning and teaching. Without enthusiasm, no learning or teaching can properly be successful. During Muslim rule, the teachers and students enjoyed freedom of movement from one class to another, from one teacher to another, and even from one institution to another to learn and teach on their choice. It developed a very enthusiastic environment, which is essential for any educational journey. Student-teacher relation was very intimate, while the present system has been failed in developing an intimate student-teacher relation, which is one of the fundamental elements for any good educational policy. Thus, there were features of medieval learning, which can make remarkable contribute to make the present educational system and help in creating morally developed and patriotic citizens for the country.

Conclusion

Education among the Bengali Muslims in pre-colonial Bengal was a dynamic process, which was quite pluralistic in nature. The state initiative played a significant role in spread of education among the masses. In pre-colonial Bengal, the consciousness of scientific and rational education among the Bengali Muslims was rare in curriculum. This was the consequence of many interior and exterior hindrances as they were often stuck in poor socio-economic condition.

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