MUSLIMS AND EDUCATION

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(Secular Perspective Aug. 1-15, 2001)

It is generally thought that Muslims do not prefer to send their children, especially girl-child to school. They are mainly concerned about religious education and therefore are inclined to open more and more madrasas. This stereotype was further reinforced when in mid-seventies number of madrasas were opened, especially in northern, western and central India. This was mainly because it was in early seventies that oil revolution took place in the Arab world and they began to give money to poorer Muslim countries including for religious education. Many Ulama from India succeeded in getting financial aid for starting new madrasas and also expanding existing madrasas. It is undoubtedly true that during seventies and in subsequent decades quite a few madrasas were established in India.

However, there are many reasons for expansion of madrasas, which must be understood. It should not be reduced to a stereotype, which is often done. First, we would like to throw some light on the prevalence of madrasa education among Muslims in India. Firstly, it should be noted that during Muslim rule in medieval ages these madrasas were centres of higher knowledge and these madrasas provided religious as well as then available scientific knowledge known as ‘ulum-i-aqliyah (intellectual knowledge). These centres of learning were naturally patronised by the kings, nawwabs and jagirdars (feudal lords). Thus what is known as Dars-i-Nizamiyah synthesised both religious and natural sciences of the time.

However, with the decline of the Mughal rule and establishment of British rule these centres of higher knowledge fast declined and were left with no resources to grow and imbibe the modern knowledge. Now small madrasas came into existence in different localities, which were run by donations from local communities and catered to elementary religious knowledge. The biggest institution of Islamic learning which came into existence in the post-Mughal period in north India was Darul ‘Ulum Deoband. This institution founded by Maulana Qasim Ahmed Nanotvi and others also had very humble beginning. It was founded in nineteenth century after failure of 1857 war of independence. It was founded in nineteenth century after failure of 1857 war of independence.

This madrasa had come into existence during period of great crisis for north Indian Muslims when Muslims were facing British wrath and the ‘Ulama were in the forefront of anti-British struggle much before Indian national Congress came into existence and national freedom movement started. These ‘Ulama remained steadfast in their struggle for freedom and also became allies of the Congress and firmly opposed two nation theory and partition of the country. These ‘Ulama led by Maulana Mahmudul Hasan opposed modern education not so much because it was modern and secular but more so as it was British imperialist system.

Sir Syed on the other hand became founder of the modern educational institution in Aligarh known as MAO College, which subsequently became Aligarh Muslim University. In a way both Sir Syed and the ‘Ulama of Deoband school were complimenting each other rather than contradicting. Both systems of education were
needed in that period of acute crisis. It was, for Muslims, also a period of an acute identity crisis. Modern secular education alone would not have sufficed for Muslims during that period of crisis. It was very difficult for the Muslim elite to come to terms with total eclipse of their power. And it was for this reason the ‘Ulama played far more significant role in freedom struggle to drive the British out than the secular Muslim elite. The secular elite was far more interested in making a deal with the Britishers to safeguard their own interests.

The ‘Ulama at the same time were more worried about religious identity and hence madrasa education flourished under their patronage. Also, it was in keeping with the requirement of Muslims as there was glaring poverty among them since most of them were converted from lower Hindu castes. Modern western education made not much sense to them nor could they afford it as they faced stark poverty. Many sociologists have pointed out that among Indian Muslims before independence there was either feudal class or the poor class. Thus either there were very rich Muslims (mostly from feudal class) or very poor Muslims, middle class being very weak. The ‘Ulama catered to the poorer classes by opening madrasas where free religious education was imparted and many madrasas also offered free food and clothing.

The period immediately after partition was also full of crisis for Muslims. The educated rich and middle classes migrated to Pakistan for greener pastures and poor illiterate masses were left behind. Once again it was madrasa education which came to their rescue and fulfilled their psychological and intellectual need. The Government of India could not open even enough primary schools to fulfil need for schooling for the poor. Muslims being among extremely poor had to fall back on madrasa education. And those who somehow could make it to government schools dropped out before completing primary education as the poor parents would like them to work somewhere to supplement family income. But even after dropout they would continue madrasa education due to convenient timings either early morning or late evening.

All this put together accounts for lack of secular education among the Muslims and flourishing of madrasa education. The ‘Ulama also saw an opportunity to run more madrasas after oil revolution and many more madrasas came into existence including those of higher learning which catered to increased Muslim population in the post-independence period. Now the girls also began to join both primary and higher centres of Islamic learning. There are courses being run for girls in places like Malegaon in Maharashtra and other places.

However, having said this about the madrasa education I would like to discuss the situation about the modern secular education. It is necessary to dispel the stereotype that Muslims resist modern secular education and opt for madrasa education only. Such stereotypes, besides being unreal, are also dangerous as they intensify communal attitudes. Madrasas are looked upon as centres of fundamentalism and also now generally dubbed as centres of ISI activities. This is, to say the least, highly politically motivated. It is highly regrettable that Mr. Advani announced that madrasa education is a security risk. Mr. Advani and his intelligence services should know better. There may be a few black sheep but such sweeping statements are very dangerous and amount to condemning whole community. Those, which indulge in such activities should be isolated and punished under the law of the land.
Apart from madrasa education there is growing trend today among Muslims to go for secular education. So far the socio-cultural factors rather than religious one kept Muslim girls away from modern school education. Today, with the growth of middle class among the Muslims the trend for modern education is on the rise. This year, for example a Muslim girl Nuashin Khan topped in B.Sc. from Bombay University. Another Muslim girl from Bihar obtained second position in the IAS examination. According to 1981 survey there are 0.4% graduates now among Muslims. Compared to others it may appear dismal figure but nevertheless it shows changing trend among Muslims.

According to a survey in U.P. by Mr. Sherwani the number of Muslim girls passing matriculation in first class has jumped 13 times. Though the base may not be very high still the jump of 13 percent is no mean figure. The same survey by Nusrat and Ahmed Rashid Sherwani indicates that in different colleges in U.P. there is great increase in the success rate of Muslim girls. Also, all over India one finds increasing number of Muslim colleges, particularly girl colleges coming into existence. It is highly encouraging trends. Syed Hamid, ex-vice chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, has taken it as his life mission to popularise modern secular education among Muslims. He had taken out a Talimi Caravan (educational caravan) through various cities and towns of north India to urge upon Muslims to go for modern education. It has had considerable impact on Muslim mind.

There is great difference between stereotypes and ground reality. While stereotype remains static the ground reality changes. Muslims are still very backward as all social, economic and educational indicators bear out. Yet, the new middle class which is emerging on the Muslim horizon is realising that the community must advance in educational field in this information technology era. Azim Premji, the only high ranking industrialist among Muslims in India has declared that his foundation will educate 60 thousand students every year and he also declared that education is the best gift one can give to children.

The Government of India under the primiership of Mr. Rao had announced to give Rs.500 crores to Maulana Azad Foundation for educational and other needs of the community. However, the government gave only Rs. 100 crores. The Congress Party in Maharashtra had promised Rs.100 crores for Muslims in its election manifesto. However, it has given only Rs. 5 crores so far. If the government fulfills its promises Muslims can achieve much higher rate of literacy. The main problem for education among Muslims is poverty, not religion or lack of will. There are not many industrialists or businessmen among Indian Muslims like Azim Premji to come to their rescue. Now there seems to be will among Muslims but no resources. There is also a trend for imparting modern education in the madrasas. But again the lack of resources stares in the face of Muslims. Some madrasas have, however, adopted modern sciences as part of their curriculum.