

Madrassa: A System Of Religious Education, Special Reference To Kerala

Mohammed Shanid M.¹ , Dr. Imtirenla Longkumer²

¹Ph.D. Scholar , Department of Sociology, Pondicherry University Puducherry-605014

²Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Pondicherry University, Puducherry-605014

Corresponding author- Dr. Imtirenla Longkumer

Abstract

The most important factor influencing public perception that determines a community's image and respectability in public life is its educational development. The madrassa curriculum does not prepare students to navigate modern society's structures and leaves out some topics (Fiqh- Islamic Jurisprudence, Akhlaq- Morality) when they transfer (after the tenth standard) to a regular high school. Madrassa education systems avoid looking outside their walls for professional knowledge and skill development and stick exclusively to theological values and knowledge. This study reveals the evolution of madrasas in Kerala's educational revolution, from their inception to the present. The madrassa tradition has changed significantly in terms of curricula, infrastructure, and other related aspects of learning and teaching techniques since the time of the Prophet Mohammed and continues to this day. This study focuses on Kerala's traditional development, timely changes, and subtle variations in religious education. The paper shows how madrasas and their traditional Masjid-Dars (Islamic learning system related to the mosque) systems shaped the religious and educational landscape, particularly in Kerala, through various eras and relevant systems.

Keywords: Madrassa, Dars, Education, Islamic Reformation.

Introduction

Islamic education develops students' sensibility so that they are guided by Islam's spiritual and deeply held ethical principles in their outlook on life, actions, decisions, and approaches to all types of knowledge (Ajijola, 1999). They receive mental training and discipline to acquire knowledge for reasons other than intellectual curiosity or material worldly gain. Instead, they are trained to become morally upright individuals who advance their families, communities, and nations' spiritual, moral, and physical well-being. For hundreds of years, the Quran has had a variety of influences on the educational philosophers of various nations. The Islamic nations have embraced the Quran as their guiding document for living.

Most Muslim families prioritize the need to expose their children and adults to all knowledge in order for them to understand the guidelines outlined in the Quran for a positive relationship with Quranic teachings, society, and nature. Islamic education is described in the Quran as the process of developing character within the Islamic worldview (Shefi, 2008).

The word "Ilm," or knowledge, is used in the Quran. In addition to numerous verses in the Quran emphasizing the value of knowledge, it is believed that the Prophet himself had a passion for learning. It is documented that he exhorted his followers to travel to China if necessary to further their education. Notably, Islam had not yet reached China at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and no Muslims in China qualified to instruct in Islamic studies (Wani, 2012).

This tradition thus illustrates the Prophet's open-mindedness and foresight in advising his followers to seek knowledge from anyone, whether they be Muslims or not. On the other hand, Islam equated knowledge with worship. Reading the Quran and reflecting on it were acts of worship, as we learn new things.

Evolution of the Madrassa System

"To learn, the study" is the meaning of the tri-consonant Arabic word "D-R-S," is whence the term "Madrassa" originated (Wani, 2012). As a result, the definition of a Madrassa is "a place where learning and studying are done (Wani, 2012). When speaking Arabic, the meaning of the word "Madrassa" is identical to that of "school" in English, whether it be in a private, public, or parochial institution, as well as whether Muslim, non-Muslim, or secular, any elementary or high school. However, the name "Madrassa" in English typically refers to mainly Muslim organizations (Ahmed, 1981).

The Prophet Muhammad himself actively promoted education after the development of Islam. The Prophet founded and taught in the first Madrassa, located in Darul Arkam (house of Arkam), at the foot of the Saafa Mountain. Abu Bakr, Omar ibn Khattab, Usman ibn Affan, Ali ibn Abu Thalib, and the other Sahabis (the companions of the Prophet) were the first pupils of the first educational institution created under Islam (Wani, 2012).

Later, the Prophet moved to Madina to propagate the word of Islam and gave Hazrat ibn Umme Maktum and Misab bin Umayr the duty of teaching. He took more than 60 to 70 prisoners of war from the Battle of Badr and, in exchange for Fidiya (a ransom), gave them the obligation of instructing ten youngsters each as part of the Muslim initiatives to spread education. The Prophet founded a school close to the Nabavi mosque as soon as he arrived in Madina. Its official name is Madrasah-e-Soffa (Alam, 2002)

Education continued to advance during the Caliphate of Islam after the Prophet's demise. All newly converted Muslims started out sharing the Prophet's teachings. At the time, paying teachers was not common practice. "To them,

deliver at least one verse bearing my name," the Prophet said, which inspired the new converts. Students were not compelled to pay tuition during that period, just as teachers did not accept payment for their services. Scholarships were set up for the personal expenses of deserving students and the education-related costs. The funds raised through Zakat ¹were used for all of these expenses.

At the time of the eighth Umaiya Khalifa (ruler) Umar bin Abdul Aziz, state proclamations were issued nationwide, and arrangements were made for teacher salaries, allowances, and student scholarships. During this time, the mosques also established separate classrooms for students and teachers. Islamic learning, wisdom, and research institutions were established throughout Arabia and Iran. Similar effects of the Arab invasion, brought about by Bin Qasim's conquest of the Indus, were also felt in Indian regions

Foundation of Madrassa's in the Indian Sub-Continent

The Indian subcontinent did not receive a better educational system due to the Muslim conquest of India. They created Maktabs (schools) and Madrasas in place of the conventional Indian educational institutions that taught Sanskrit and Vedas. Beginning in the sixth century in Western India and the twelfth-to-thirteenth century in Eastern India, the Arabs began to emigrate to the Indian subcontinent (Engineer, 2001). The Madrassa education system has grown and expanded in major cities like Delhi, Lucknow, Rampur, Agra, Madras, Dhaka, and other important cities in the Western area of India as a result of initiatives taken by the freshly immigrated Muslims and the growth in the Muslim population.

The first Madrassa was founded, according to the Tarikh-e-Firishta², in the western Indian region of Multan. Nasiruddin Kabacha most likely constructed the Madrasah Firuzi structure for Maulana Kutubuddin Kasani in the sixth century. Another report claims that the creation

of Maktabas and Madrassas in India to educate Muslims in their religion took place in the eleventh century (Hamid, 1987). In Ajmer, Shahabuddin Muhammad Ghori founded several Madrassas where local Muslims who converted to Islam and the enslaved people, he had brought to India obtained an education.

Islamic education expanded rapidly across this country in 1203 after Ikhtiaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiar Khilji conquered Bengal and Bihar and established Muslim rule. There were several mosques, madrasas, and khankas³ built. However, trade links between Arabia and India predated the formation of Muslim control here. Along with the traders, many holy men and scholars came to India. These revered figures stayed and built mosques, madrasas, and khankas.

Muslim rule continued in India after the defeat at the Battle of Plassey until the establishment of the British colonial government. From historical artifacts and relics, Abul Hasnat Nadabi developed a list of Islamic educational institutions founded throughout the lengthy Muslim rule. It mentions Madrassas founded in Multan, Ucha, Ajmir, Delhi, Punjab, Agra, Ayodhya, Bihar, the Deccan, Malabar, Kashmir, Gujrat, Surat, and Bengal. According to the Bengal section, among other cities, ancient Madrassas have been discovered in Rangpur, Dhaka, Murshidabad, Laxmanabati, Gour, Asthipur, Ghorasheed Mahalla, and Shilapur (Soni, 2010).

Development of Madrassa Education in Kerala

Although historians disagree, Islam spread to the Indian subcontinent during the initial phase. Even before the spread of Islam in Arabia, the Arabs had established trade ties with Kerala. As and when it originated in Arabia, the Islamic ideology made its way to Kerala via early Arabian traders. Traditional Arabian traders had been heavily involved in Kerala's religious proselytization.

The coastal regions significantly influenced the growth of the Muslim community in Kerala. Many Arab traders and missionaries settled here in the early years of Islam. The various names of Kerala coasts that were populated by Arab colonies and settlements were mentioned by Arab travelers to Kerala in the 14th and 15th centuries. Ibn Battuta, a well-known Arab traveler, visited Kerala in the 14th century and wrote extensively about the Arabs and their families who had made Kerala their home (Kumaradas, 2017)

The Prophetic teachings of Muhammad quickly gained widespread acceptance in Arabian society. As a result, Islam was recognized as Arabia's official religion. It evolved into an institutionalized religion that adhered to fundamental principles mentioned in the Quran's teachings. In this context, Islamic educational initiatives were launched. These institutions' main goal was to provide their patrons with fundamental instruction in all fields of knowledge and Islamic teachings.

The social climate in Kerala at the time greatly aided Islam's expansion. Kerala society at the time did not value any particular social values. Therefore, Kerala society did not obstruct the early Arab merchants' efforts to spread Islam. The oppressed lower classes primarily drew to the Islamic teaching. Without coercion or force, many people converted to Islam under these circumstances.

In a society where Muslims made up a small minority compared to the native population, forced conversion was impossible. One of the main reasons for religious conversion in Kerala was the state's pervasive cultural and religious environment. The first stage of the Islamic educational process began with the newly converted people because they were unfamiliar with the Islamic tenets. Early Islamic educational initiatives successfully provided new adherents with a basic understanding of Islamic teachings.

Numerous mosques were built by the early Muslim settlers in Kerala, and each mosque has

a Qazi⁴. The earliest religious teachers and leaders were the Qazis. They served as teachers to the newly converted individuals and leaders for prayer. It was the beginning of Kerala's Madrasa educational development.

The Masjid (mosque) is where the history of Madrasa education began. In various contexts, a mosque's functions may change. However, its significance as a center for rituals endures. Although mosques are primarily used for prayer, they have contributed significantly to the growth of education. Mosques continue to serve as centers for religious education because they impart knowledge and help students develop moral character so they can fit in as full members of society.

Mosques played a significant role in Kerala's development of Islamic culture. The importance of mosques in the lives and cultures of Muslims can be seen as inevitable if we look at any Muslim settlement in Kerala. The fact that the missionaries who had traveled to Kerala under the direction of Malik ibn Dinar also focused more on building mosques could prove that it is not a recent phenomenon.

In earlier times, Islamic missionaries played a crucial part in advancing religion. Although they did not fully comprehend its doctrines, Kerala's illiterate populace was fascinated by Islam. Most early Islamic centers were near the sea, and a sizable portion of the local fishing population was also drawn to Islam. It could not be said that these uneducated people were drawn to Islam by the wisdom and knowledge of the Arabs. It is also essential to consider how the Arabs discussed their ideas with the locals.

Since the spread of Islam in Kerala, mosques have served as institutions of religious instruction, imparting knowledge while also helping students develop moral character so they can fit in as full members of society. Mosques served as the foundation for advancing Islamic social life and the culture that resulted in the establishment of Mahal Jamaat.

Most likely, early Muslims used the same approach. The Othupally (single teacher schools

set up in neighborhood mosques) got its name for this reason. The Muslim community highly regarded the Mullas (teachers). Their actions and words had a significant impact on the Muslim world. Small sheds, mosques, or Mullas' homes were used to house these primary institutions. These institutes did not subscribe to study materials in the form of printed books. The study materials were made of wooden sheets covered in white soil on both sides, after which Alif and Ba (Arabic alphabets) were written in charcoal ink. The Mahal covered the institution's expenses. The Madrasa system of education had just initiated like this.

Dars⁵ was the name of the higher education system. Nearly all Dars were connected to mosques. Dars also provided housing for the students from the nearby villages. At times, the senior Dars students served as the Othupally's leaders. The mosque doubled as a hostel and classroom. Although mosques were primarily used for prayer, they also played a significant role in the growth of religious education. The villagers provided food for the teachers and students. Every household took in a pupil. As a result, there was a correlation between the students and the villagers.

Madrasa is an educational setting that provides instruction in the Qur'an, hadith (the Prophet Muhammad's narrations), fiqh (jurisprudence and Islamic law), and related religious discourses. This term can be used in elementary school and higher education. As a result, from primary through tenth grade, the educational system experiences subtle local changes following the educational managements that oversee these institutions. However, in Kerala, a madrasa is an institution that teaches religion to children from primary through high school. The curricula for colleges and universities are known as "Jami'a," while educational institutions offering curricula equivalent to the eleventh and twelfth grade are known as "Dar al-Uloom" (literally, the abode of knowledge).

Kerala is a prime example of such a place where the traditional Dars system still holds sway alongside modern model madrasas, Arabic

colleges, and even private Islamic universities. The 'Mahal' system of Kerala, a well-run organization of Muslims in Kerala for their educational, cultural, and religious activities as it operates as an independent contribution under Samastha, is linked to the main structure of innovative movements.

Reform Movement in Madrasa Education

There were many constraints on the early primary Islamic religious, educational system. The newly converted individuals were illiterate and ignorant of the fundamental tenets of Islam. Therefore, the early Islamic religious teachers only imparted the core principles of the Islamic faith. The traditional Gurukula system was used then, and oral instruction was the primary mode of instruction. While Dars served as centers for higher education, Muslims in Muslim settlements established religious and educational institutions known as Othupalli.

For a very long time, the traditional Othupalli system persisted. However, Kerala's educational system experienced a significant turning point in its history during the colonial era. Modern (secular) education was first introduced to India by the British government. They established a network of universities and colleges in India, giving birth to many affluent Indians familiar with contemporary culture. During the first half of the 19th century, Western education started to spread throughout Malabar. However, due to Muslims' enmity toward the British, the efforts were, fortunately, a complete failure in their case.

British Malabar heavily influenced the national movement at the time. British government policies destroyed the Malabar peasantry. The Malabar Mappilas turned into rioters due to the landlords' oppressive practices and high land revenues. The British historians attempted to portray all riots in a communal perspective to emphasize the divide between landowners and tenants. The Malabar peasants' resistance to British land policy gradually evolved into opposition to all of the British government's policies. As a result, Muslims started to view all British policies with suspicion. It contributed to Kerala's Muslims' inadequate response to

English education. Muslims fiercely opposed the educational system the British introduced because they thought it threatened to undermine the very foundation of the Islamic faith.

Muslims in Kerala placed a high value on madrasahs where their children could receive religious instruction. Near the mosques, religious institutions were built. So, the Muslim community relied heavily on Arabic and Arabi Malayalam for Madrasa education; it was propagated that only these two languages were necessary for their education. They, therefore, believed that learning English, a foreign language was valueless for community communication or education.

At that time, the religious authorities had much influence over the Muslim populace. However, these leaders did not support English or western education in the early years. The Muslim leaders were suspicious of the missionaries' activities, while the Christian community supported promoting English education. They believed that missionaries promoting modern education would use it as a tool to convert people to Christianity. Consequently, Muslim religious leaders opposed English education and referred to it as *Naraga basha* (the language of hell). A portion of Muslims' backwardness and lack of modern education can be attributed to this.

The historical occurrences that followed the Malabar Revolt in 1921 reminded the Muslim community of a religious, educational, and cultural revival. In addition, westernized liberal leaders like Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab, Rashid Rida, Muhammad Abdu, and Jamal Uddin Afghani influenced Kerala, whereas most Muslims continued to be traditional Sunnis. The Organization of Muslims in Kerala was founded in 1922, with Kodungallur as its focal point. Samastha Kerala Jameyyatul-Ulema (All Kerala Ulema Organization) was founded in 1926 at Calicut as a result of a series of discussions between the great scholar Asheyk Ahmed KuttyMusliyar, Sufi scholar Asheyk Assayed Abdurrahman, and some other prominent scholars of traditional Sunnis (Koduvayakkal, 2021)

Samastha focused primarily on preaching traditional Islamic ideologies, opposing liberal Islamic ideologies that were internally profoundly rooted in Western and European ideologies—defending the rights of the Muslim community and providing Islamic education appropriately and systematically. To ensure the harmony and order of madrasa teachers, Samastha created this sub-wing (Jameyyathul Mudarriseen). The Malabar region has many madrasahs, students, and teachers who collectively may surpass other Indian states in flawless execution, timely application of changes, and reaping great results regarding Kerala Muslims' religious and cultural aspects.

The importance of knowledge emphasized in the Quran and hadith inspires Muslims to learn all knowledge. Islam does not distinguish between education and knowledge; both are called *ilm* (knowledge). The production and dissemination of knowledge declined and stagnated in the second half of the medieval ages, focusing primarily on theology. The Islamic community had benefited from all areas of knowledge in the interim. The renaissance and reformation movements during this time brought about changes in medieval European society, and the Muslim community's influence also played a significant part in these changes.

Reformative ideas had destroyed the traditional and unscientific Madrasa teaching methods. The leaders of the reform movement claimed that conventional Muslim educational methods were insufficient for giving Muslims a complete understanding of Islamic principles. The traditional Mullas could train only the fundamentals of Islamic practices. As a result, the student's understanding of what they had learned was unclear. At first, the orthodox segment of the Muslim community did not fully support the reformist leaders. The Mullas opposed changes when they impacted the community's orthodox members because they thought the process would weaken their hold on power. However, they started to take the lead in spreading the Madrasa system over time. The Madrasa systems in place were reorganized to resemble modern educational institutions.

The reformative leaders' tireless efforts were not just focused on Madrasa education. Additionally, they were working on reorganizing the Muslim neighborhood. They harshly criticized the traditional, non-Islamic customs that the Muslim community still upholds and cast doubt on the veracity of ongoing customs like *qabr-ziyarat* (prayer at the tombs of Muslim saints), *Dua*, and priesthood. The leaders of the reform movement initially encountered fierce opposition from the orthodox Muslim organizations. Later, a group of Muslims began to accept the reformist ideology gradually. A new section of the Muslim community was organized due to it. The Kerala Jamaat Ulama and Jamaat-Islami were significant organizations established to spread the modern reformist ideology among Muslims.

The Samastha Kerala Jame at Ulama, Dakshina Kerala Jame at Ulama, Kerala Naduvathul Mujahidin, and Jamaat-e-Islami were among the other organizations that grew in the Muslim community of Kerala during this time. However, there are no noticeable ideological differences between these organizations. Each group contributed creatively to the improvement of Kerala's Muslim community. However, they have strayed from their original goals today. There is no shared understanding between these organizations. There are no coordinated efforts anywhere, hindering the Muslim community's advancement. These organizations' divergent ideologies frequently lead to ideological ambiguity among the community's members.

In Madrasa education, the Samastha-Kerala-Jame-at-Ulama holds the top spot. They have set up several Madrasahs in Kerala and other states. The Ulamas recognized the shortcomings of traditional Madrasa education. They established the Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidhyabhyasa Board to address the issues that the Madrasa system seeks to address. It has put into practice many efforts to improve the educational opportunities for the Muslim community. The educational body has developed a new academic calendar and syllabus for Madrasahs. Additionally, the Samastha provides training for Madrasa instructors to increase their skills.

These kinds of activities have brought in new developments in Islamic education.

Although Islam requires its adherents to learn from anybody in the world, the Madrassa system of education only offers religious education. Islam does not limit these institutions' ability to provide or promote rational education.

Madrassas in Post-Independence

In Kerala, higher religious education experienced a significant transformation in the 1950s. Modern Arabic colleges were developed from the traditional Dars educational system. The crucial aspect of this Arabic college system is that it prioritizes both religious and modern education. The possibility is provided for the new varieties of Arabic colleges to meet their educational requirements. Hundreds of Arabic colleges are currently operating in Kerala under various management. These institutions provide free meals, accommodation, and other services.

Along with Islamic theology, specific Arabic colleges launched degree and post-graduate programs. The younger generation benefited from recognizing the importance of both religious and modern education. These kinds of drastic modifications in Islamic education are a result of current reformist movements as well. The Jamaat-e-Islami and Mujahid are two influential groups at the forefront of Kerala's reform movement. They believed that only changes in religious education could bring about the reformation.

The Muslim community began to support this vision for the future gradually. The community established several modern education institutions that support their reformative vision in addition to their unwavering efforts in religious education, which contributed to the emergence of a new generation in the community. They have also created many initiatives for Muslim women's empowerment and several Arabic colleges for them. Nowadays, numerous institutions are affiliated with reputable universities. They also began many programs for Muslims' cultural and social advancement in addition to these activities. They introduced a large number of secular periodicals in the local language. Although the reformist

organizations significantly improved the fragmented Islamic education system, their efforts were only directed at the Madrasa curricula. The activities of these organizations have also given the community a distinct character from other communities.

A low socioeconomic background of impoverished, illiterate, and oppressed Muslims is where the Madrassa education is becoming most ingrained. The students are now only fit for religious purposes. After their religious education, students work in rural areas as Maulavi or Madrassa teachers. In contrast, students from other groups of Muslims will leave madrasas as soon as they have learned the fundamentals of Islam, which they need for their daily prayers and rituals.

However, the Muslim community has realized that the traditional Madrassa educational model needs to undergo significant modifications. These organizations primarily serve as religious institutions, rarely engaging in conversation about the high end of modern science and technology. Theology students at Madrassas are subjected to inappropriate instruction that makes it difficult for them to deal with modern challenges. This rising awareness of the disconnection between religion and daily life undermines Islam's ability to hold and influence Muslims and speeds up the secularization process.

The state's madrassas were proposed to be transformed into legitimate educational establishments that welcome all forms of knowledge. As a result, these organizations can join the National Open School network, which will let Madrassa students continue their education. To produce 'good citizens,' 'good Muslims,' and 'good preachers,' the Islamic Educational Board may work to improve the quality of the Madrasa education. Additionally, the addition of technical education would prepare students for the rigors of modern life.

Similar to this, a new educational setting might be created to help Madrassa students realize their potential, particularly in the areas of art and culture. Additionally, it would be ideal for Islamic learning institutions to offer non-Muslim

students interested in learning more about Islamic education the chance to do so.

Conclusion

The Muslim community places particular emphasis on the importance of maintaining the religious foundation of the community. However, society must also make education a potent weapon for enabling the community to assert its rightful place within the country's educational and developmental mainstream. To strengthen the community, Kerala has developed its curricula and syllabus. However, they deal with many contemporary issues, ranging from content-related to structural.

The main issue is insufficient time for religious studies since English-medium schools have become more prevalent. However, some organizations have decided to hold madrassas at night, which is crucial. Undeniably, children who must complete their homework with their parents' assistance going out at night for madrasa studies would cause more harm than good. Many behavioral disorders in children can also result from it. Therefore, a substitute should be found by the community.

In conclusion, it is clear that the state's Madrasa education system exclusively meets the Muslim population's religious requirements. However, the so-called competitive pressures unleashed by liberalism and globalization have fallen disproportionately on the Muslims of the younger generation. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare the students to become familiar with a modern education while still receiving religious instruction for them to fulfill the requirement of the Quranic Dawat (exhortation) in conformity with changing socio-cultural landscape.

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