

Calcutta Madrasah: A historical journey from British to Independent India

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Abstract:

The Calcutta Madrasah was established by Warren Hastings, the governor General of British India in 1780. It is regarded as the first educational institution established by British Government in India. Initially Calcutta Madrasah or Mohammedan College was placed on the shoulder of Maulana Majduddin, a great Islamic Scholar and disciple of Shah Waliullah Dehlavi. In 1850, Dr. A. Springer was appointed the first Principal of Calcutta Madrasah and in 1854 the Anglo-Persian department was created. Initially the course curriculum of Madrasah was designed on the model of '*Dars-e Nizamia*', a leading Arabic-medium school existed at Lucknow. In the later date the subjects like Medicine, Mathematics, Philosophy and Logic were included as well as the Undergraduate programme were introduced in 1863. An Anglo-Persian Department was also framed in 1854 and in Islamic Courses like *Kalim*, *Fakhrul Muhaddithin* and *Mumtazul Muhaddithin* have been introduced in Calcutta Madrasah. After 1947 a part of Calcutta Madrasah had been shifted to Dhaka and with which numerous valuable and rare books and manuscripts have been shifted and a numbers were lost forever. Finally the Aliah University Act was passed by the West Bengal Legislative Assembly in 2007 for up gradation of Calcutta Madrasah to Aliah University. The Act came into force on on 5th April, 2008. This historic institution has produced eminent scholars and writers in the Indian subcontinent through its long journey for more than two hundred and fifty years.

Keywords: Madrasah, Governor, management, principal. curriculum

Introduction

"Madrasa is an institution of learning, where Islamic sciences including literary and philosophical fields are taught". The aim of Madrasa education is to inculcate the belief and practice of Islam among its followers and guide them to follow Al-Qur'an and Traditions of the Prophet (PBUH). The foundation of Madrasa education is therefore, basically standing on two pillars of Qur'an and *Sunnah*.

Madrasah education is neither by-product of any particular historical event or emergent situation, nor does its foundation and functioning solely depend on the state support or patronage of political authorities. This is actually an in-built system of Muslim society which worked for the spread of education among Muslim masses through ages without any break. In case of India, it may be surprising but this is a fact that its origin goes back to pre-Muslim period. As the foundation of the Madrasah education was laid by the Arab traders initially in the form of *Maktab* in South India (especially in Malabar) in the last part of 7th century when they started residing along with their families in the newly established colonies. During the Arab rule in Sind (8th -10th centuries), the Madrasah education got formal shape as Madrasahs were set up in several towns in this region which had sprung up as centres of Islamic culture and civilization.

After the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the beginning of 13th century, the Madrasah education developed rapidly, and with the expansion of Muslim state, series of Madrasahs were established in different parts of the country. This tradition got firmly established and further developed during the Mughal rule (1526- 1857). In fact, it had been a popular practice on the part of Muslim rulers to make arrangements for the construction of mosques and setting up centres of religious education (i.e. *Maktab*s and *Madrasah*s) in the territories that came under their control. Moreover, many '*Ulamas* (Religious Islamic Scholars) of the period themselves took up the task of teaching especially the main subjects of Islamic learning in local mosques or at their own houses which had flourished in the form of individual centres of teaching and functioned like Madrasahs. During the Muslim rule in India the rising number of Madrasahs may be judged from the fact that according to the author of the book '*Subhul A'sha*' (5/ 69), in the 14th century 'Tughlaq' period there had been about one thousand Madrasahs in Delhi itself. And a huge number of Madrasahs were established in Bengal also.

But after the East-India Company taking power in Bengal and the spirit of education for Muslim community cooled down. Meanwhile, some Muslim leaders from the city Calcutta agreed to establish an institute in the city for saving the Arabic Language and Islamic Studies side by side to provide higher education to the next generation of the Muslim community. They got better opportunity when Maulana Mulla Majduddin came to Calcutta. He was the famous '*Aalim*' (learned man) and was a genius student of Shah Waliullah Dehlavi. So Muslim leaders had submitted a proposal to Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of Bengal and demanded for financial help. He agreed to the proposal and established the Calcutta Madrasah in the month of October in 1780 in the rented building in the city of Calcutta.

Calcutta Madrasah in 18th Century

The Mohammedan College or Calcutta Madrasah was founded in Culcatta in 1780 by Molla Majduddin and some Muslim leaders with the cooperation of Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal.

The laws, rules and regulations of the government were traditionally printed in Persian. Arabic was also in use, because Muslim laws were all in Arabic. Thus the East India Company needed an institution, which would produce students with knowledge in Persian, Arabic and also in English. The *Moulavis* and *Muftees* of the government '*Adalat* were required to know English and Bengali. So when the Muslim leaders and scholars have proposed to setup an institution for better and higher education then the British government had accepted this proposal without further delay¹.

Due to the inconvenience in the rented building, Warren Hastings purchased a piece of land and erected a suitable building for the Madrasah at Padmapukur area presently in Kolkata in 1781².

In 1788, due to some unavoidable circumstances, Sir John Shore the then Governor General abolished the post of Superintendent and undertook the administration together with the general reformation of the Calcutta Madrasah³. In 1791 an enquiry was conducted under the Board of Revenue and there were some serious irregularities and mismanagements were disclosed.

Calcutta Madrasah in 19th Century

First Annual Exam of the Madrasah was held in the town hall on 15th August 1821 in presence of many respectable official and gentlemen of Calcutta. The second and third examination was conducted in Oct 1822 and January 1823. ⁴

In 1823 Mr. John Adam, the temporary successor of Lord Hastings had instituted a body, the General Committee of Public Instructions for the purpose of ascertaining the state of public education in this particular part of India. The proposal of Madrasah Committee were referred to

¹ . Bengal Past & Present, Journal of the Calcutta Historical society, Vol-8, P- 104

² . Past & Present of Bengal, Vol- vii, P-99

³ . Abdus Sattar, Tarikh-e Madarsah Aliah, Secretary Publication, Dacca. Vol- 1, Page No. 99

⁴ . Dr. Dipak Bhattacharya, Dr. Jibendu Roy & Miss Papia Banarjee, Higher Educational Institutions During Pre-Independence Period in West Bengal: An anthology of profiles (1780- August 1947). Published by: Pandulipi, 1A College Row, Kolkata- 700009, Page No.- 182

it for consideration; and so long as the General Committee continued in existence, the affairs of the Madrasah were managed through a subcommittee, assisted by a the Secretary.

In Consequence of the unhealthiest and other inconvenience of the original site of Madrasah building, the government resolved to construct a new building in a more suitable locality know as 'Kallinga' in June 1823⁵. The Government sanctioned Rupees 14,0535 (Fourteen Thousand Five Hundred Thirty Five) for construction and land purchase of Calcutta Madrasah⁶.

The Following lines have been written on the stone.

“By the Blessings of Almighty God. In the reign of His Most Gracious Majesty George the fourth under the auspices of the Right Hon’ble Willium Pitt Amherst, Governor General of the British Possession in India.

John Pascar Larkin Esqr Provincial grand Master of Fraternity and free Masson in Bengal laid the foundation stone of the edifice the Mohammedan College of Calcutta amidst the acclamation of a vast Concourse of native population of this city in the presence of a numerous assembly of fraternity and of the Presidents and member of the committee of general instruction on the 15th day of July in the year our Lord 1824 and of the era of Masonry 5824 Planned and Constructed by William Born and J. Mackintosh and William Kemp.”

Introduction of English in Calcutta Madrasah

Attempts were made several times by the authorities to introduce English Classes in the Madrasah in 1826, 1829 and 1833. Attendance in English classes were made compulsory but with no success. Then the authorities tried to attract students with increased stipends for the English class. Even with this allurements English classes continued to remain practically unsuccessful. Mean while in the year 1837, the Government abolished Persian to make room for English as official language. This event gave a death blow to the interest and aspiration of the Muslims in general and the Madrasah students in particular. One more attempt was made to teach English in the Madrasah in 1839 by opening Anglo-Arabic department. But this initiative

⁵ . Now Haji Md. Mohsin square, previously- Wellesley Square.

⁶ . Education Progress report. Date. 05 Oct, 1842

had also failed because between the year 1829 to 1851, the Madrasah could produced only two Junior Scholars, Abdu Latif and Waheedun Nabi⁷, who new English.

Mr. W.W. Hunter has written in his famous book- *'The Indian Musalmans'*: "In 1826, a further effort was made to adapt the institution to the altered necessities of the times; an English class was formed, but unhappily soon afterwards broken up. Three years later, another and more permanent efforts was made, but with inadequate results. During the next quarter of a century, the Muhammedan College shared the fate of the Muhammedan Community. It was allowed to drop out of sight; and when the local government made any sign on the subject, it was some expression of impatience at its continuing to exist it all.

Between the year 1851 and 1853, however the authorities awoke to the necessity of doing something an institution which had become a public scandal. The result of the proposals then put forward⁸ amounted to this. The College was divided into two Departments, the lower of which, under the name of the Anglo Persian Branch, taught Urdu, Persian and English up to a very moderate standard. The upper department was devoted entirely to Arabic. The defects of this plan soon became apparent. When the youths passed into the purely Arabic Branch, they forgot what they had learned in the more miscellaneous lower department"⁹.

The reason of the failure of the attempts of the authorities to introduce English In the Madrasah is not far to seek. They always tried to introduce English as an additional subject outside the Madrasah which was an additional burden to the students. Moreover, the Muslims in all ages and lands had held their religion above every things else. The Bengali Muslims, then did not take kindly to English education altogether that would divert from religious education. As a self-respecting nation, with a living touch of their past superiority and above all, with their strong

⁷ . Educational Proceedings, April 1861.

⁸ . W.W. Hunter, B.A. LL.D. , *The Indian Musalmans*. Published: London, Trubner and Company, 1876, Reproduced by: Sani H. Panhwar California, 2015. Page No. 119
By: Mr. J.R. Colvin the civilian who then chiefly enjoyed the confidence of the Muhammadan community, as from his accomplishments in Persian and Arabic he deserved it, and who on the death of Mr. Thomason, become Lieutenant- Governor of the north Western Provinces. he died in the Agra fort during the Mutiny.

⁹ . W.W. Hunter, B.A. LL.D. , *The Indian Musalmans*. Published: London, Trubner and Company, 1876, Reproduced by: Sani H. Panhwar California, 2015. Page No. 120

religious susceptibilities, they could not probably have chosen to act otherwise¹⁰. In the year 1827 a medical class was instituted in the Madrasah.¹¹

Managing Board and Courses of Calcutta Madrasah

The Aliah Madrasah was managed by an all-white Board of Governors from 1781 to 1819AD. A new Board of Governors was constituted under an English Secretary and a Muslim Assistant Secretary, which ran the Madrasah from 1819AD to 1850AD. The post of Principal for the Madrasah was created in 1850 and Dr. A Sprenger was appointed the first Principal of Calcutta Madrasah College. From 1850 to 1927, all Principals were appointed from British Civil Service. Many of them were famous Orientalists. In April 1927, *Shamsul Ulama* Khaja Kamaluddin Ahmed was appointed the first Muslim to become the Principal of the Calcutta Madrasah.

The course curriculum of Calcutta Madrasah was designed on the basis of the model of *Dars-e Nizamia*, a leading Arabic-medium school at Lucknow. In the later period the subjects like Mathematics, Philosophy and Logic were included in the syllabus of Calcutta Madrasah.

B.A level classes were offered in the course curriculum of the Madrasah in 1863. But it was abandoned later in 1888. A separate Anglo-Persian department was introduced in 1854. The objective was to groom up the Persian-medium students to appear in the Entrance Examinations. A three-year long *Kamil* course was introduced in 1907. As per its recommendation, a three years 'Title' course termed as *Fakhrul Muhaddethin* was opened in 1909. But later this 'Title' course was renamed as *Mumtazul Muhaddetheen* which covered two years duration. According to the recommendation of Muslim Education Advisory Committee (MEAC) of 1931 a new *Mumtazul Fuqaha* course was introduced as alternative to *Mumtazul Muhaddethin* in 1936.

Madrasah Aliah after Independence

The Partition of India on 15th August 1947 dealt a serious blow to the institution. As per decision of the "Steering Committee for Division of Assets" all the moveable properties like: Chairs, Tables, Fans, Black Boards, Almirahs, Doors, Windows inclusive of the library with thousand of rare books and manuscripts of Calcutta Madrasah were transferred to Dhaka

¹⁰ . Article by Md. Moniruzzaman, M.A. (double) B.T. Former Principal, Madrasah Aliah, Calcutta. History of Calcutta Madrasah, a bird's eye view. Published in Calcutta Madrasah College 1780-1980, Bicentenary Celebration Souvenir.

¹¹ . Abdus Sattar, Tarikh-e Madrasah Aliah, Secretary Publication, Dacca. Vol- 1, Page No. 106

Madrasah¹². As a result, the Calcutta Madrasah almost ceased to exist. But responds of the leading Muslims of West Bengal , Maulana Abul Kalam Azad the first Education Minister of independent India, took the effective initiatives to reopen Calcutta Madrasah on April 04, 1949.

The Madrasah Aliah has lost his all past glorious by the partition. Prof. Masood Hassan, W.B.S.E.S. Ex- Principal Calcutta Madrasah has written in his article: “The Partition of Bengal a series of damages to the state in various fields. As far the educational institutions are concerned, the Calcutta Madrasah was the worst sufferer. It was founded as early as in 1780 at the instance of Warren Hastings the then Governor General of India, and was the first educational institution established in India by the East India Company. For more than a century and half it spread the Islamic Learning. And promoted the studies of Arabic, Persian and Urdu in the country. It attracted reputed teachers from different part of country. Who possessed expert knowledge of Islamic sciences. They delivered learned lectures in the Madrasah on traditional lines. These teachers were headed by eminent orientalist like Dr. A. Sprenger, Sir E. Denson Ross and Mr. Nassu Less, who for the first time introduced western method of modern researches in India. Its Library which had the treasure of valuable printed books and rare manuscripts, was famous all over the world. The political turmoil and the exodus of 1947 and the following years, however, dealt a heavy blow on this historic Madrasah. The teachers with very few exceptions opted for the then East Pakistan. Frustrated students had no other alternative but to disperse, and many of them discontinued their studies. The rich library was ransacked and the books along with the furniture were taken away in country boats to Dhaka. The Madrasah had to be closed and there remain nothing but the hold dilapidated building which sadly reminded its past glory”.

In 1949 the efforts of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy succeeded in giving a new lease of life to the Madrasah. It started with new Principal, new teachers, new students, new furniture and with new aspiration. But the sunshine of hope was short lived. Once it was re-established, the Maulana, preoccupied with his engagements as Union Education Minister could not spare his time and attention for it.

Professor Masood Hassan has rightly said “in 1959 when I took over as Principal, the affairs of the Madrasah were in bad shape. I found that the teaching work was much below the desired standard. Growing indiscipline and the students were responsible for frequent serious troubles in and outside the Madrasah. The teachers far from devoting their energies to academic pursuits were interested in supplementing their meager income. Students most of whom were poor and needy were easily exploited by resourceful teachers with political affiliation. Madrasah building was virtually occupied by anti-socials and the criminal of the locality who took shelter

¹² . Abdus Sattar, Tarikh-e Madarsah Aliah,

in some neglected parts of it in the day-time. And used it as their headquarter at night. This sorry state of affairs persisted for several years. When I left in 1964 there were clear evidence of indiscipline, lawlessness, frustration and mal administration in the unhealthy atmosphere of the Madrasah. These maladies further aggravated in the next 20 years as either the post of Principals remained vacant or only stop gap arrangements were made to full up the vacancy in the period”¹³.

In 1985 His Excellency Sri Uma Sankar Dikshit, the then Governor of West Bengal, in his inaugural speech at a belated Bi-Centenary function of Calcutta Madrasah, proposed that the Calcutta Madrasah should be treated as an educational institution of national importance and be upgraded to a University¹⁴.

Kidwai Committee in 2001

The Governor of West Bengal in 2001 constituted a Madrasah Education Committee under the chairperson of the great educationist and the former Governor of West Bengal and Bihar, his Excellency Professor Dr. Akhlakur Rahman Kidwai, In its report submitted in 2002, the committee made many thought provoking, far reaching recommendations, regarding Calcutta Madrasah and its curricula and syllabi. The committee recommended that the Calcutta Madrasah should offer courses in both Islamic Studies and modern Social Sciences and Humanities under the aegis of its different units. It should also provide opportunities of vertical mobility for higher learning and research in Islamic Studies including *Kamil* and *M.M.* Course at Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Islamic Studies; Economics, Political Science, Sociology and History under the faculty of Social Studies; apart from Arabic and Persian, English, French, German, Chinese and Japanese. At the school of Modern languages and Literature. 3year Degree course in Journalism and Mass Communication. And 1year Diploma course in Television Journalism at the Institute of Mass Communication. B.Ed. and M.Ed. courses under the faculty council of Education and Education Technology should be introduced. Thus the Calcutta Madrasah could develop as a leading centre of higher education in Eastern India. Gradually it should be recognized as a deemed University. Several initiative were endeavored by the state Government in pursuant to its recommendations.

¹³ . Prof. Masood Hassan, Ex Principal Madrasah Aliah, Calcutta Madrasah College 1780-1980, Bicentenary Celebration Souvenir. Page No. 04

¹⁴ . Dr. Dipak Bhattacharya, Dr. Jibendu Roy and Miss Papia Banarjee. Higher Educational Institutions during Pre Independence Period in West Bengal: An Anthology of Profiles. (1780- August 1947), Publisher: Pandulipi, 1A College Row, Kolkata- 700009, Page No, 184.

Finally the Aliah University Act was passed by the West Bengal Legislative Assembly in 2007 for up gradation of Calcutta Madrasah into Aliah University. The Act came into force on and from 5th April, 2008¹⁵.

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¹⁵ . ibid