



## RE-VISITING EDUCATIONAL TRADITION AMONG THE MAPPILAS OF MALABAR

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### ABSTRACT

The educational activities of the early Muslims of Malabar centred on religion. Mosques served as main centres of education. In course of time primary classes were conducted in othupallis adjacent to the mosques and advanced classes called Dars inside the mosques. In the beginning the curricula of the Dars were broad, providing for both secular and religious education. Later its curricula became limited to theological aspects, depriving it of its spirit and soul. This led the religious leaders of the community to bring about educational reforms. The Madrassah movement, the reform movement came to be called, saw the introduction of modern subjects like astronomy, geography, natural science, mathematics, logic, Quranic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, grammar and rhetoric. In order to teach these subjects, teaching tools like globes, maps, atlases, charts, models and the latest dictionaries were used. During the British rule, special permission was granted for religious instruction in schools but it was prohibited by law soon after India achieved independence. This prompted the leaders of the community to float their own institutions which resulted in the proliferation of madrassahs which succeeded in providing an ideological stimuli to the Muslim community. With the onset of western secular education, they came in for service criticism from within the Muslim community. The formation of the state of Kerala gave a huge boost to the Arabic education. The key role played by the modern madrassah for the educational renaissance of Malabar Muslims cannot be over-emphasised.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the major problems faced by the Mappilas of Malabar, soon after the Islam spread there, was that of imparting education to the rising generations of Muslims. Muslims, who had been torch-bearers of knowledge during the middle ages, made great contributions to the development of modern sciences, and the intellectual contributions of Muslims under the Abbasids and Umayyads in Spain testify to this. In this they were inspired by the teachings of the Holy Quran which enjoins education as the duty of each and every individual. In Islam religion and education are inseparable and identical, and this is all the more conspicuous among the Mappilas of Malabar in view of their intense adherence to the religion of Islam. The holy prophet is quoted as saying that one should be prepared to go even as far China to seek knowledge. The very first surah of Quran was revealed to the Prophet with the message: "Read in the name of the Lord who created man from the clot of blood." Thus it can be seen that the educational efforts made by the early Mappilas centred around Islam.

Primary education was conducted in single-teacher institutions called othupallis, the term denoting that the method of instruction was oral. They were housed outside or adjacent to mosques (Logan, p. 108). The teacher was called a Mulla or Mullaka who would recite the lessons loudly until the students studied them by heart (Ibid). Many a time the lessons were taught by senior students of the Dars. These were conducted in a parrot-fashion and in Arabic so much so that no student could understand them. The curriculum centered on recitation of some small suras of the Quran and the invocations and hymns used in prayers and religious rites. The teacher used to teach alphabets by writing them on a wooden slate polished by clay in which they were written with a wooden stick called Kalam. Other writing materials such as pencils, pen, chalks, etc. were not generally used. For advanced religions learning there existed special arrangements in prominent mosques. This kind of system of education under the control of Musaliars, called Dars, meaning lesson or class, was conducted in the upstairs of the mosques. The ground floor of the mosques in these cases was earmarked for prayers. Here the students sit in a semi-circle, with the teacher occupying the centre facing the students. The students from the neighbouring villages were

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also accommodated in the mosques. The teaching was oral, and the teacher would read each sentence of the Arabic text and then translate it into Malayalam. The students would repeat the words uttered by the teacher in a parrot - fashion until they are memorised by them. The most studious and able students were honoured by being called "to the light" (Wilakkattirikkuka) (U. Mohammed, p.32). That is to say they are provided with special instruction at the table of the master on a raised platform (Logan, p.108). More often than not, senior students served as tutors of the younger ones. This was synonymous with the Hindu traditional system of education known as monitorial system. Here in the Dars system food was provided by the local people from their homes. The most prominent of all the Dars in Kerala in early times was the one conducted at Ponnani in the big Juma Masjid, believed to have been built almost eight centuries ago by Shaykh Fariduddin ibn Abdul Qadir Al- Kurasani who was the disciple of Shaykh Mohiyuddeen Abdul Qadir Jilani. It rose to fame thanks to the services rendered by the Makdom family. It has attracted students from foreign countries such as Indonesia, Malaya and Java (C.K. Kareem, p.305). Thanks to the religious leadership given by Ponnani, it came to be called the little Mecca of Malabar.

In the beginning the curricula of the Dars were broad, providing for both secular and religious education. It included such subjects as Quran, Hadith, Fiqh, Arabic language and literature, Grammar, Rhetoric, Geometry, Astronomy, Arithmetic, logic, Philosophy, Medicine, History and Tasawwuf. Later the curricula became limited to Arabic grammar, Quran, Hadith and Fiqh depriving the education of its spirit and soul. The Dars system had its own positive and negative aspects. As the students were given food from houses, they were treated as members of the house. Such a student would encourage the children of the house in education. The members of the house could clear their doubts on religious matters. This resulted in the diffusion of knowledge. The main drawback of the system was its defective teaching method. Another defect was that the Arabic language was taught not as a living language but for understanding the religious texts. (Asgar Ali Engineer (ed.), p. 136). Even for understanding the texts, it was not properly taught resulting the religious texts incomprehensible to the students even after years of study.

The unscientific system of education in the Dars continued for centuries. Western education and progressive ideas inspired the religious leaders to bring about educational reforms among the community. The pioneer of this movement was Koya Kunhi, who founded the Madanul Uloom Madrasah in Cannanore in 1911. (C.K. Kareem, p. 311). A unique feature of this Madrasah was that provided for both religious and secular education. Sooner than later such madrasas were started at Kuttiyadi, Badagara and Calicut, and in course of time the movement engulfed the whole of Kerala, revolutionising the Muslim educational sphere. The real leader of the Madrasah Movement was none other than Moulana Chalilakath Kunhamad Haji whose educational experiments centred round Tanmiyathul Uloom Madrasah at Vazhakkad, run by the famous Koyappathodi family. There he started higher classes on modern lines, renaming it Darul Ulum Arabic College. (C.A. Muhammad Moulavi, p. 46). Here he introduced modern subjects like astronomy, geography, natural science, mathematics, logic, Quranic Exegesis, Hadith, jurisprudence, grammar and rhetoric.

In order to teach these subjects he used teaching tools like globes, maps, atlases, charts, models and the latest dictionaries (M.Abdullah Kutty, p. 77). It was he who introduced the examination system for the first time into the Madrasah educational curriculum in Malabar. Students from far off places came to study there. It was one of the best educational institutions in the South India (Sayed Moideen Sha, p. 60). Prominent leaders of the community such as E.K. Moulavi, K.M. Moulavi, Cherusseri Ahamed Kutty Moulavi were students of this college (K.T. Mohammad Ali, p. 42). The work of Chalilakath Kunhammad Haji inspired a great deal on Vakkom Mohammed Abdul Qadir Moulavi who brought about such reforms in Travancore during the same period. In Cochin this was done by such scholars as Sanaullah Makti Tangal and Shaykh Muhammed Mahin Hamadani Tangal.

The conclusion of the Third Anglo-Mysore War (1792) saw the British occupying the Malabar. During the British rule special permission was granted for religious instruction for Muslim students in Malabar. But soon after independence, religious instruction in schools was prohibited by law, and the religious instructors came to be retrenched. This proved to be a blessing in disguise for the Muslims because they were forced to make their own arrangements which resulted in the proliferation of Madrasahs throughout the length and breadth of Malabar. This paved the way for the various religious and cultural organisations such as Kerala Jamiyyatul Ulama, Jammah-e-Islami and Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama floating their own institutions of religious learning. Of these the Kerala Jamiyyatul Ulama was founded in 1924. The great scholars who were associated with this organisation, apart from the great scholar and religious reformer, Vakkom Abdul Qadir Moulavi, were: K.K. Jamaluddin Moulvi, MCC Abdurahiman Moulavi and K.M. Moulavi. The progressive and modern views held and propagated by these leaders were not to the liking of the conservative and orthodox sections of the community so much so that they floated in 1926 another organisation of their own called Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama. The conservative leaders who worked as the backbone of this organisation included such persons as Sayyid Abdurahiman Mulla Koya Thangal, K.K. Muhammad Abdul Bari, P.K. Mohammed Miran Musaliyar and A.P. Aboobacker Moulavi. The other organisation namely Jammah-e-Islami, which attaches paramount importance to the integration of religious and secular education, came into being in 1944.

The British deployed in 1904 Mullas of the Othupallis to certain schools in Malabar to teach the Quran to the Muslim students. Thereafter they were appointed as regular teachers in primary schools after giving them special training. When, after sometime, the government started a few Muslim High Schools, the Arabic teachers or religious instructors were appointed in these schools. At that time there were no common prescribed text books for schools except for the tenth standard. The text books used were: Al-Oira'atul Reasheedah, Part III; Allugatil Arabivyah; Tadree Judduroos, Duroosum Avvaliyyatum Fee Mutalatil Arabiyyah; Duroosullisahabatul (K.T. Mohammed Ali, p. 47). In Malabar, before independence, Arabic was taught in High schools only, but in 1958 the provision for teaching Arabic was extended to primary schools also. Arabic teachers were appointed in all the government and management schools where there were enough number of students keen on studying Arabic. Gradually Arabic was introduced in colleges, and a little later in the Universities. University of Kerala and University of Calicut have full-

fledged departments of Arabic for post-graduate course and research. The importance of the Madrassahs in giving an ideological stimuli to the Muslim community cannot be over-emphasised. Nevertheless as more and more Muslims embraced secular education, the Madrassah system of education came in for scathing criticism from within the community.

#### The major criticisms are the following:

- They increase the load of the students which is detrimental to their intellectual development.
- Their methods of teaching are unscientific and primitive (3) Their working time encroaches upon the school timing which results in the students finding it hard to be ready for the school in time, and
- Their orthodox nature keep the students away from the main-stream, leaving them far below the expected normal standard at the levels concerned (U.Mohammed, p.35).

#### Conclusion

The genesis and spread of Islam in Kerala necessitated imparting of religious education to the rising generation of Muslims. Thus in the beginning educational activities among the Muslims of Kerala, particularly Malabar, centred on Islam. In early times when there were no schools and colleges to impart education among the Muslims, mosques served as centres of education. Later Othupallis were established adjacent to the mosques for religious instruction of young boys and girls. The advanced religious classes called Dars were conducted inside the mosques. In the beginning the curriculum of the Dars were very broad which included all subjects which were essential for the moral, spiritual and material well-being of a man. But in course of time its curricula shrank to Arabian grammar, the Quran, Hadith and Fiqh.

This resulted in producing students woefully lacking in knowledge of the present day world. This opened the eyes of the progressive leaders of the community who set about bringing about reforms of the Dars which resulted in the Madrassah Movement. The madrassahs had made a deep impact on the collective mind of the Muslims. With the spread of secular education among the Muslims the Madrassah system of education also came in for severe criticism within the community. The British employed a few Mullas to teach the Quran to Muslim students after which they were appointed as regular teachers in primary schools. Arabic education received a huge boost with the formation of the state of Kerala. Now Arabic is taught not only in schools and colleges but also in universities in Kerala. The modern Madrassahs and Arabic colleges have played a significant role for the educational renaissance of Muslims in Malabar.

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