

Maulvi Abdul Karim of Sylhet on

Reinvigorating the Culture and Society of Muslim Bengal

(Delivered at the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference held in Calcutta in December 1899)

With the fall of the Muslim empire in India in 1757 A. D. the seats of learning which supplied government officials, disappeared. It was necessary, therefore, to establish an institution to qualify Muslims in Bengal for public service. In 1782 Warren Hastings laid the foundation of the Calcutta Madrasah. The object in view was to “promote the study of the Arabic and Persian languages and of Muhammadan Law, with a view more especially to the production of qualified officers for the Courts of Justice.” For about half a century the successful students of the Madrasah monopolised almost all the judicial and executive posts under the Government, and they predominated at the Bar.

When Lord William Bentinck was Governor-General it was decided that English should be the medium of education for the people of India. Lord Macaulay, a member of the Governor-General’s Council, wrote his celebrated minute and Bentinck passed in 1835 the memorable resolution in favour of English education... When it was proposed to appropriate the whole of Government Educational grant to English

education, a petition was submitted against it, signed by about 8000 Muslims of Calcutta, who believed the introduction of English was a step towards conversion to Christianity. Although there was no real cause for this suspicion, as the Government had declared, in 1808, the policy of religious neutrality, the Muslims boycotted English education. It is a pity that room could not have been found for both English and oriental education. Had oriental learning found a place in the curriculum of English schools and colleges, as at present, most probably there would not have been all this misapprehension. The advocates of English education seem to have overshot their mark when Lord Macaulay, as their mouthpiece, declared, with his characteristic facility for exaggeration, that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” The exclusive study of a foreign language confirmed the suspicion and the result was, as will be shown later on, most detrimental to the interests of my co-religionists.

Our utilitarian countrymen, the Hindus, who during Muslim rule had readily learned Persian, and some of whom had even become teachers of that language, quick to perceive the immense advantage that knowledge of English literature and science would give them, early devoted themselves to western studies. Their advanced section under the guidance of the celebrated patriot and linguist, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the philanthropic watch maker, David Hare, established an institution called ‘Vidyalaya’ for the education of Hindu children in English language and literature. In the course of a few years a taste for English was widely disseminated among Hindus, and several schools, conducted by young men, educated in the “Vidyalaya” sprang up in different places. The tide thus set in strongly in favour of English education.

The first fruits of exclusive English education in a foreign language, not well-grounded in their ancestral theology and traditions, were infected with scepticism, and the Hindu society of the time presented the appearance of chaos. Some of the most intelligent of the English educated Hindus of the time, whose belief in their ancestral religion had been affected did not hesitate to embrace Christianity. All these unfortunate circumstances could not harm but alarm a religious people like Muslims, most of whom, for a long time, kept aloof from English education and greatly suffered consequently in their worldly prospects. As the Government never adopted any proselytising policy and English education was purely secular, the Muslims had less

cause to fear conversion through English education than any other community in India. Islam being founded on principles, [it is] too strong to be easily shaken. In fact, it has been less affected by western education and civilisation than any other system. Muslims should have perceived the advantage of the change and should have adapted themselves to the exigencies of the time. But as an ancient conquering race cannot easily divest itself of the traditions of its nobler days and as they were confident of the superiority of their system of education, the Muslims continued to pursue their old studies with the lamentable result that before long they were practically excluded from that share of office and emolument in Government service to which their position entitled them and which they had once monopolised.

The respectable Musalmans of Bengal have to learn more or less five languages, viz., Arabic, Persian, the language of their Scriptures and Literature, Urdu, the language of their society and Bengali and English the language of the courts. It is this that stands, to some extent, in the way of fair competition with other classes of people, who have to learn two or three languages only. Though Urdu is not the vernacular of the Muslims of Bengal, it is regarded as their national language, their Lingua Franca by which they communicate with their co-religionists all over India. Besides, many of the religious books of the Muslims have been translated from Arabic into Urdu. Those who cannot afford to teach their children Arabic, content themselves with teaching them Urdu, through which they may learn the fundamental principles of their religion and traditions.

The deplorable state of things mentioned above remained almost unnoticed till recent years. At last it attracted the attention of British statesmen who studied the subject. Mr E. C. Bayley writes, "It is any subject for wonder that they held aloof from a system which, however good in itself, made no concession to their prejudices, made in fact no provision for what they esteemed their necessities and which was in its nature unavoidably antagonistic to their interests and at variance with their social traditions." Sir William Hunter writes more strongly, "The language of our Government schools in Lower Bengal is Hindi and the masters are Hindus. The Musalmans with one consent spurned the instructions of idolaters through the medium of idolatory... The astute Hindu has covered the country with schools adapted to the wants of his own community but wholly unsuited to the Muhammadans... Our rural schools seldom

enable a Muhammadan to learn the tongue necessary for his holding a respectable position in life and for the performance of his religious duties.” These and similar remarks attracted the notice of Government and the Eral of Mayo dealt with it in an exhaustive Resolution in 1881. His Excellency directed that further and more systematic encouragement and recognition should be given to the classical and vernacular languages of the Muhammadans in all Government schools and colleges; that in avowedly English schools, established in Muhammadan districts, the appointment of qualified Muhammadan English teachers should be encouraged; that assistance should be given by grants-in-aid to enable them to open schools of their own, and that greater encouragement should be given to the creation of a vernacular literature for Muhammadans.”

On receipt of reports from Local Governments and Administrations, Lord Northbrook came to the conclusion “That wherever the ordinary vernacular of the country was read and written in the Hindustani or the Urdu character there Muhammadans occupied their proper position in the primary and secondary schools...and the Muhammadans were not so much averse to the subjects which the Government had decided to teach as to the modes or machinery through which instruction was offered.” In concluding the Resolution, His Excellency expressed the hope “that in all provinces where Muhammadans were few and often exposed to all the disadvantages which affect a religious minority without wealth or influence, it would be the persistently maintained.” This resolution was considered by the Local Governments and steps were taken in the desired direction by some of them.

The Government of Madras, notwithstanding the contrary opinions expressed by the Director of Public Instruction and the Syndicate of the Madras University, was convinced “that the existing scheme of instruction was framed with too exclusive reference to the requirements of the Hindu students, and that Muhammadans were placed at so great a disadvantage that the wonder was not that the Muhammadan element in the schools was so small but that it existed at all. “Some important steps were accordingly taken for the spread and encouragement of Muhammadan education in the Madras presidency. The Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, remarked in his report for 1871-72, “The Musalmans have fallen behind the time, and require still the inducements held out forty years ago to the whole community, but of which only

Hindus availed themselves...Unless the strong inducements in general used forty years ago are held out to Muhammadans now I have little hope of seeing the drawn to our schools.”

The Government of Bengal, however, decided that it was not necessary to establish special schools for Muhammadans. But one important step was taken; a portion of the Mohsin endowment was set free for the encouragement and extension of education among the Muhammadans of Bengal. Madrasas were established at Dacca and Chittagong, scholarships were created for Muhammadan students and allotments were made from the Mohsin fund to the zilla schools for paying two-thirds of the fees of poor Muhammadan students and for appointment of Persian teachers.

The Education Commission of 1882 made an exhaustive inquiry into the subject, consulting all available reports and resolutions and examining veteran Muhammadan educationists as witnesses. After thoroughly threshing out the subject of Muhammadan Education of which the following are important:

- (1) That the special encouragement of Muhammadan education be regarded as a legitimate charge on Local, Municipal and on the Provincial Funds;
- (2) That indigenous Muhammadan schools be liberally encouraged to add purely secular subjects to their course of instruction;
- (3) That the official vernacular, in places where it is not Hindustani, be added as a voluntary subject to the curriculum of primary and middle schools for Muhammadans maintained from public funds, and that arithmetic and accounts be taught through the medium of the vernacular;
- (4) That in localities where Muhammadans form a fair proportion of the population provision be made in middle and high schools, maintained from public funds, for imparting instructions in the Hindustani and Persian languages;

- (5) The higher English education for Muhammadans being the kind of education in which that community needs special help, be liberally encouraged;
- (6) That where necessary a graduated system of special scholarships for Muhammadans be established, to be rewarded: (a) in primary schools, and tenable in middle schools, (b) in middle schools, and tenable in high schools (c) on the result of the Matriculation and First Arts Examinations, and tenable in colleges;
- (7) That in all classes of schools, maintained from public funds, a certain proportion of free studentships be expressly reserved for Muhammadan students;
- (8) That Muhammadan inspecting officers be employed more largely than hitherto for the inspection of primary schools for Muhammadans.

In proposing these measures the Commission reviewed the general situation thus:

“Apart from the social and historical conditions of the Muhammadan community in India, there are causes of a strictly educational character which heavily weigh it in the race of life. The teaching of the mosque must precede the lessons of the school. The one object of a young Hindu is to fit him for an official or professional career. But before the young Muhammadan is allowed to turn his thoughts to secular instruction he must commonly pass some years in going through a course of sacred learning. The Muhammadan boy, therefore, enters school later than the Hindu.

In the second place, he very often leaves the school at an earlier age. The Muhammadan parent belonging to the better classes is usually poorer than the Hindu parent in a corresponding social position. He cannot afford to give his son so complete an education. In the third place, irrespective of his worldly means, the Muhammadan parent often chooses for his son while at school an education which will secure for him an honoured place among the learned of his community, rather than one which will command success in the modern professions or in official life.

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The above are the principal causes of an educational character which retard the prosperity of the Musalmans.”

Source: M.A. Azam, *Life of Maulavi Abdul Karim*, Calcutta: Sri Gouranga Press, 1939, pp. 39-47; reprinted in M. Abdullah, *Bangladesher Dash Dishari*, Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1990, pp. 286-291.