

## **Mawlana Ubaidullah al-Ubaidi Suhrawardy on**

# **‘Muhammadan Education in Bengal’**

(Essay first published in 1873)

“The Muhammadans of Bengal may be divided into three classes: the higher class, the middle class and the lower class. The higher class consists of the Zemindars, Government officials, and some of the merchants. The middle class is composed chiefly of small landholders, lakhirajdars and Aymadars. The lower class class include includes the cultivators or the peasantry, tradesmen or shopkeepers, and those (especially amongst the inhabitants of Calcutta and other large towns) who are engaged in menial service under European gentlemen, such as Khidmatgars, butlers, cooks and Khansamas.

The Musalman population of large towns in Bengal, whose ancestors came from the Upper Provinces and settled here, generally speak Hindustani in their homes as well as in society. But the family dialect of the Musalmans of all classes, residing in the interior of the country, it is a dialect called Musalman-Bengali. It is a compound of the Arabic, Persian and Bengali languages. Had it not contained the verbs and prepositions of the Bengali language, it would have been unjust to apply the denominations of Bengali to it. But the Musalman inhabitants of the zillahs of Midnapur, Cuttack and Balasar, in the towns as well as in the Mufassal, speak Hindustani, though not in so polished a form as that spoken by the people of Upper India. This peculiarity is owing probably to the influence of the Pathans, who came in company with Daud Khan and settled in the districts of Midnapur, Balasar and Cuttack. The people of the eastern parts of Bengal, such as Chittagong, Sandwip and other places, speak a patois, which is hardly intelligible to people of western Bengal. But when they come to Calcutta, or to Chinsurah, to prosecute their Arabic studies, they learn Hindustani, as the lectures are generally given in that language.

The middle and some of the higher classes of the Musalmans of lower Bengal, especially of the western districts, often trace their descent from some saints, darweshes, or learned men, who were emigrants from Persia or Arabia, and thereby claim a superiority of birth, called by them Sharafat, or nobility of descent. The members of such families, although in extreme poverty, often avoid forming connection with those whose ancestral pedigree is doubtful. Their women dislike to

take dinner at the same table with the ladies of the foreign families, however rich and respectable in life. This desire to keep up family-purity has grown to such an extent, that it has introduced something like caste amongst the Muhammadans, though it is well known that the distinction of caste is foreign to the genius of Islam. No doubt, there have borrowed this desire, as well as their repugnant to the remarriage of their widows, from their Hindu brethren. Some of the middle class Musalmans of western Bengal call themselves Makhadin (plural of Makhadum i.e, the served). They hold small pieces of land called Aymas for their subsistence; hence they are sometimes called Aymadars. These lands were granted by the Muhammadan rulers to their ancestors who were holy personages, or men of letters.

In former days, the chief avocations of the higher and middle class Musalmans were literacy. The Madrassas were generally restored to by the youth of those classes. The number of the Madrassas was very small. Some well-to-do people established a Makhtab at home by employing a teacher for the instruction of their children, with whom the sons of the neighbouring poor people read gratis, by copying manuscripts. In former days, Arabic was very little cultivated in Bengal, the chief subject of study having been Persian literature. Those who qualified themselves in that language held respectable posts under Government. But some enterprising youth, who were desirous of acquiring fame for Arabic scholarship, travelled to the Upper Provinces, and underwent various privations in order to study that language.

When Munshi Sadruddin, a high Government official, invited Maulavi Abdul Ali of Lakhnow to Bengal, who for his deep learning was dignified with proud appellation of Bahrululoom, or the sea of learning, and established a Madrassa in his native village Bohar in the district of Burdwan, from that time the cultivation of Arabic learning began to be encouraged in this province. Formerly, there were several private Madrassas, where these seminaries existed, private people also used to supply the students with free board, and in many cases accommodated them in their own houses, such acts being held meritorious in a religious point of view.

In later days, a Madrassa was founded in Calcutta by Warren Hastings in 1781, with the view of enabling the Musalmans of Bengal to acquire such knowledge of Arabic literature and science as would qualify them for the public service, chiefly in the judicial department, and was endowed with a zemindari yielding an estimated rental of Rs. 29,000, which was in 1819 commuted to a fixed yearly charge on the treasury of Rs. 30,000. Most of the students after receiving preliminary instructions in the above mentioned Mufassal Madrassas, or by private tuition, came to the Calcutta Madrassa for completing their studies. The subjects of the studies in the Madrassa at that time were the following: Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Literature, Mathematics including Arithmetic, Algebra and Astronomy based on the Ptolemaic geocentric system, Muhammadan Law and Jurisprudence. In 1829 an English department was organized. It was first composed entirely of scholars on the Madrassa foundation, but was shortly after thrown open to Muhammadans of all classes. As in those days, the Government, out of policy, encouraged Muhammadan literature and science, high and respectable posts under Government being held out to those who possessed a competent knowledge of Muhammadan Law and literature, our co-religionists seeing that Government was so much inclined to encourage their literature, very seldom paid attention to English learning. Consequently, the Anglo-Arabic department ultimately proved unsuccessful.

In the meantime, a scheme was devised to discontinue the teaching of the Arabic sciences in the Arabic department, and to introduce the study of the western sciences through the Urdu translations of some English scientific books executed at Delhi. The mode of introducing the plan having been clumsy, it resulted in the rebellion of the students against Dr. Sprenger, the then Principal of the Madrassa, and the Madrassa was deserted by the students. Afterwards when the Madrassa was re-opened by the admission of new students, a committee was formed for devising a better plan for the education of the Muhammadans. Agreeably to the recommendation of the committee, the Anglo-Arabic and English departments were closed in 1853-54 and in their stead the Anglo-Persian department was formed on such a scale as to enable the students to compete for the Junior English Scholarship Examination, and the system of education in the Arabic department was altered; that is to say, the teaching of the Arabic sciences was discontinued, the subjects chiefly taught being the Arabic language and literature and Muhammadan Law. The students of the Arabic department were not allowed to learn English or Bengali, which were exclusively taught in the Anglo-Persian department.

In 1836, another Madrassa was founded at Hughli by the munificence of the late Haji Muhammad Muhsin, the principal features of which were similar to those of the Calcutta Madrassa. And there was also an Anglo-Persian department attached to the institution exclusively for the Musalmans, the Hughli College and its Collegiate school being open to Hindus and Christians. This Madrassa was chiefly resorted to by the people of the suburban districts, while the Calcutta Madrassa was recruited chiefly from the Musalmans of the eastern parts of Bengal. I now come to the present state of education among the Musalmans of Bengal. In early days, our co-religionists, as I have said, seeing that Government was so much inclined to encourage their literature, very seldom paid attention to English learning. But in later times, when Government abruptly discontinued the encouragement of Musalman learning, and made the University Matriculation Examination the only door for entering into high posts under Government, our co-religionists were left far behind by their Hindu brethren. Now they are in an awkward state. They do not feel inclined to learn their own lore, seeing it to be utterly useless for worldly purposes; nor have they the means to get English education.

The Madrassas of Calcutta and Hughli are, at present, attended chiefly by the people of Eastern parts of Bengal, namely Chittagong and Sudharam, only 4 or 5 per cent, being of the Western or suburban districts. The Musalmans of Chittagong are, for the most part, a class of people who are fanatical in the extreme, and who have no sympathy with modern progress; they are, therefore, quite averse to English education. It is for this reason, that the introduction of English into the Arabic department of the Calcutta Madrassa has of late proved a total failure. But the Musalmans of Western Bengal, as well as the most respectable portion of the Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal are far more liberal in their ideas. They thoroughly appreciate the benefits of English education. They send their children to English schools, to the Anglo-Persian department of the Calcutta Madrassa and to the English department of the Hughli College. It is very desirable to turn the Madrassas to some purpose. At the present the Musalmans of the higher classes, who are rich men, generally send their children to receive English education to the English departments of both the institutions mentioned above; but the majority of the middle class Musalmans, owing to their poverty, cannot afford to give their children the

benefit of English education. Now, if a department were added to the Mafassal Madrassas with the simple Arabic standard together with English teaching, it might do a great deal of good to the Musalman population of Western Bengal.

I shall now state the reasons of the paucity of Musalman students in Mafassal schools, and try to ascertain the remedy for the evil. The Musalmans of the middle class have no motion of spending anything on education. In former times, an Arabic or Persian teacher was employed by a rich man for the instruction of his children, with whom poor boys received lessons gratuitously. It must also be borne in mind that Maulavis, among our co-religionists, teach poor pupils gratis, thinking it to be a meritorious act. The students used to copy manuscripts and read them with the Maulavis. The causes of the Musalmans keeping themselves aloof from Government schools are as follows: (1) Pecuniary difficulty, that is to say, inability to supply the necessary cost of English education. The Musalmans are comparatively poorer than the Hindus, owing to their expensive mode of living, to their being forbidden to take usury. (2) The disadvantages met with in the existing schools. One or two Muhammadan boys, placed in the same school with Hindu lads and Hindu teachers, are often teased by them and made the objects of their ridicule; consequently the poor boys are obliged to quit it and thus forego the benefits of English education. (3) The want of Musalman teachers in the Government schools, and Musalman Inspectors of schools, who could induce their co-religionists to send their children to school, explaining to them the natures of English education and removing doubts from their minds. It is desirable that these Inspectors should be Anglo-Arabic scholars (if such are available), that they may exercise influence over their countrymen. The want of Musalman Inspectors has been always unfavourable to Muhammadan education. I see very few schools in the Musalman parts of the country, they being exclusively confined to the Hindu villages to the great disadvantage of the Muhammadans. The writer of this article has walked through a Musalman tract in the district of Midnapur, extending over more than 20 miles, without meeting with a single school or puthsala. (4) The mass of the Musalman population ignorant of the nature of English education, look upon it as dangerous to their faith. These false apprehension ought to be removed through the agency of Muhammadan Inspectors as suggested above. (5) The want of Arabic and Persian teachers in the existing schools. For want of such teachers those Musalman students, who come to colleges from the Mafassal, take up Sanskrit as their second language in the University Examinations instead of Persian or Arabic, as no facilities had been afforded them for learning either Persian or Arabic. If separate institutions be established for Musalmans, it will, no doubt, be a great boon to them, otherwise the appointment of Arabic and Persian teachers in the ordinary schools, may go a great way towards remedying the evil.

The Muhammadans of Bengal are in a sad plight. They are required to learn half a dozen languages for achieving the same purposes that their Hindu brethren achieve by learning only two languages. Besides English, Muhammadans must learn Persian and Hindustani for keeping up their position in society, and Arabic for understanding their religious books; while Bengali is also indispensable to them, it being the current tongue of the country and the official language of the Zillah courts. It must be borne in mind, that the Arabic does not bear the same relation to the Musalmans as the Sanskrit does to the Hindus. The Hindus, except Brahmans, need not learn Sanskrit, for they are forbidden to read their religious books. It is for this reason, that they did not learn Sanskrit under their Hindu kings. Under Muhammadan rule, they only learnt

Persian to qualify themselves for Government employment. Under these circumstances, it is not useless for the majority of the Hindus (except for philological purpose) to learn the Sanskrit? But the case of the Muhammadans is quite different. Every Musalman is required to study his religious books, the priesthood not being confined to a particular class.

I must before concluding say a word on the Urdu language. The term Hindustani, as applied by Europeans to the language used in Upper India, is never used by the Natives in that sense. What is meant among the former is known to the latter by the name of Urdu, which differs from Hindi or Brijbhaka, in the latter getting a greater portion of its elements from the Sanskrit. The term Hindustani is used in a Minute of His Honor the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal seems to mean a language which has very few elements of the Persian and Arabic in it and which is used in daily conversation. It is acknowledged on all hands, that the colloquial dialect of a country differs from the written one, and is never taught in school. So then Hindustani, as a colloquial dialect, has no literature either prose or poetry, and its vocabulary is too poor to supply words for conveying scientific and abstract ideas. As for Urdu, the written language of Upper India, it is highly desirable that it should be kept pure and chaste. In conveying scientific ideas, however, the use of Arabic and Persian words is excusable; but such highly artificial Urdu, as is seen in the Persianized and Arabicized style of Fasanai Ajaib, in which sometimes phrases and grammatical constructions of the Arabic and Persian are introduced, is no doubt a pedantic style.

The Musalmans of Lower Bengal do not require to learn Hindustani, as all literary correspondence is invariably carried on in Persian in this part of the country. They would prefer Bengali to Hindustani, the former being the vernacular of the country and the official language of the Zillah courts. Hence some provision ought to be made for teaching Bengali to Musalman youth along with English and one or other of the two classical languages, namely, Arabic and Persian.”

(Source: M. Abdullah, *Adunik Shikha Bistare Banglar Koyekjon Muslim Dishari*, Dhaka: Kamiyab Parkashani, 2000, pp. 217-224).