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Comparative Analysis on Emergence of Islamic Education in Malaysia and Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution of Islamic educational arrangement between Malaysia and Bangladesh. It is mainly focused on background, silhouette and prospect prediction of Islamic education in both countries. The point on background explains the way of introduction to Islamic education system before gaining independence from Britain. Post-independence consequence has also discussed as the second portion of this study. Final discussion focused on the present status of Islamic education in Malaysia and Bangladesh with a comparative analysis on the subject matter.

Key words: Islamic Education, comparative study, Malaysia, Bangladesh, South and Southeast Asian, madrasa

Introduction

The aftermath of the 9/11 incident, the electronic and print media depicts a negative image in the Western society with inaccurate conception. The causes of the incident do not lie in Muslim doctrine, hence not in religion, but rather in politics (Rockmore, 2011: 28). However, some universal fundamental rights for humanity as a whole, which is to be practical and valued beneath all conditions have been set by Islam. This is especially promoting rights through education because it exhibits not only legal safeguards, but also provides a very effectual ethics. Education is a unique parameter and one of the most important aspects in enhancing the quality of human life. The process of gaining knowledge has been made mandatory and seriously emphasized in modern days compared to the olden days. This paper explores the situation and impact of Islamic education on the Malay and Bengali society. The Islamic education system in both countries is an inherent establishment with governments of both countries committed to provide its population with a secure and acceptable Islamic education system. Although the Islamic schooling strategy have been blamed unfairly for generating negative ideas and stereotypical notion of “radical” and anti-Western sentiment in recent times, Islamic education believed as the ideal and iconic organisation in Malay and Bengali society.

This succinct seeks to provide greater understanding of Islamic education system in Muslimworld. Since this Islamic schooling system indeed has its problems like other religious educational system as well, the need to explore the Muslim religion arrangement has become a major concern of current socio economic circumstances. Moreover, it is necessary to address this system as legitimate institutions in Malaysia and Bangladesh.

The background of mounting Islamic education in Malaysia and Bangladesh:

Islamic education in Malaysia began in the era of the Malay Sultanate of Malacca. As the Malay Annals reported, Malacca ruler Parameswara's conversion to Islam under the name of Megat Iskandar Syah and subsequent marriage to the daughter of the Sultan of Pasai in 1414, had unleashed enthusiasm for Islamic learning among all sections of society during that time (Hamid, 2010; Ishak, 1995). Within a couple of year, Malacca overtook Samudra-Pasai as the hub of Islamic education in the Malay Archipelago. Sultan Mansur Syah (reigned 1456–1477) and Mahmud Syah (reigned 1488–1511) were known to have developed a penchant

for *sufi* theosophy and great respect for the *ulama* (religious scholars, singular '*alim*'), whom they frequently consulted either through envoys or direct visits to their homes (Hamid, 2010; Ishak, 1995). On the other hand it has been said that the conversion of Java happened in Malacca, as two of the illustrious *Wali Songo* (Nine Saints) deemed responsible for Islamizing Java, Sunan Bonang and Sunan Giri, were educated in Malacca under the sponsorship of the Jeddah-hailed Sheikh Wali Lanang (Bakar, 1991). The idea of establishment of *Pondok* (traditional boarding school of Islamic education) generated from these scholars. It is also known by various appellations such as the Persian-derived *langgar*, *pesantren* in Java, *penjentren* in Madura, *surau* in Minangkabau, and *meunasah*, *rangkang* and *balee* in Aceh (Hamid, 2010). *Pondoks* were established in all Malay states except Johor and the Straits Settlements and Islamic education in *Pondok* was free (Roff, 2004; Hashim, et al. 2011).

The overall system was *umumi* (unstructured/general), in that students were neither divided according to age group nor was their progress monitored through examinations; rather, it was the *tok guru* (scholar / spiritual leader) who graduated his students, by way of a simple testimonial, upon satisfaction that he had mastered a subject. At their height, famous *pondoks* attracted students from as far as Sumatra and Cambodia (Hassan, 1980).

While content to leave the 'Islamically' oriented *pondok* education unimpaired, the British promoted Malay vernacular education. The Malays deeply distrusted the British intentions in founding Malay schools, which had dispensed with Islamic lessons and suspected used as a front for propagating Christianity; besides, the real need of the Malay peasant was the labour of his children in the fields. The British then realized that some form of Islamic education had to be somehow incorporated into the Malay school curriculum for it to attract Malay parents (Hamid, 2007; Hamid, 2010). In the teaching of the Malay language, the Roman alphabet (*rumi*) replaced the Arabic script (*jawi*). Such measures effectively introduced educational dualism dividing the secular and religious streams, which was alien to the Malay-Muslim mindset (Hamid, 2009). On the whole, the colonial trajectory of Malay education was extremely unambitious: to train "the sons of Malay fishermen to become better fishermen and the sons of Malay farmers better farmers" (Rauf, 1964). Educationists possessed the ideology of British colonials never intended that local (Malay) education be a medium for the inculcation of reformist thoughts, which might predictably pose problems for future intellectual subjugation; hence, the emphasis on "practical" aspects of education. Notwithstanding the benefits to be gained by Malay students in terms of improving literacy and arithmetic skills, Malay vernacular curriculum, by perpetuating colonial-defined categories and knowledge paradigms, served as a tool of indoctrination and the colonial authorities had depicted Islam as far from having a definitive role in molding the Malays as a distinctive ethnic group and nation (Hamid, 2007; Harper, 1999).

Sufism played a vital role to introducing the Islamic schooling ideology in Bangladesh and Indian subcontinent as well as prompting the advent of Muslim rule. Missionary activities of the saints, Sufis and traders of Bangladesh did not remain confined within the borders of Bangladesh. "Paddlers and traders" from Bangladesh carried the message of Islam to Malacca, hence making Malacca a crucial base for the spread of Islam in other Asian countries. Muslims have been in this country for more than a thousand years. Arab merchants made contacts with the coastal areas of Bangladesh even earlier. During this long period, Bangladesh has sometimes witnessed bitter struggle for power among Muslim rulers. There have also been periods of uninterrupted peace.

Madrasas (Islamic school) were originally places for spiritual worship that later developed into *maktabs* (higher institution) where Quran recitation and Islamic rituals were taught; in time, *madrasas* were formed as sites of Islamic theological education (Imtiaz, 2005). Since 13th to 19th century, the Muslim rulers of this region built Islamic educational centers along with mosques to educate folk about religion and science. Consequently, as Muslim rule consolidated, *madrasas* became the principal institutions in the education system. But the consequent fallen of Muslim rulers, *madrasa* education system went into decline and the Muslim educational system began to crumble. The subsequent period was, in Muslim history in Indian subcontinent, one that deeply distressed the functioning and philosophy of the *Madrasas* all over the Muslim world. The *madrasa* system was further influenced by British colonization when the British took over the territory of Bengal in 1757. While educational institutions had earlier been run independently, the British assumed responsibility for them and began to introduce reforms. The British also began to modernize the system in 1826 by introducing English in the *Madrasa* curriculum and establishing numerous modern schools, and shaping them on a "limited understanding of Islam" (Imtiaz, 2005).

There was a weird declaration in 1910; the British separated the education system into two branches, the Old Scheme *Madrasa* and the New Scheme *Madrasa*. The dual system characterized the separation of secular education for the elite and religious education for the poor; crucially the British wanted to separate the state and religion by this new system. This plan was not received favorably by Muslim leaders who predicted it as a threat and sought to replace it with what they saw as the true form of Islam. With the introduction of a new modern secular education system in the colonial period, the British fundamentally changed the *Madrasa* education

system in Bengal. They not only displaced many madrasas but also due to disrespect for the system, created a sense of backwardness about it as compared to the modern educational system conceived (Ghosh, 1975). Following independence in 1971, the madrasa education system in Bangladesh was significantly transformed; there were now two types of *madrasas*, *Aliya madrasas* (higher Islamic schools) and *Quomi madrasas* (lower Islamic schools), both of which have continued to the present-day.

Consequences of Islamic Education in post-independence era:

After gaining independence, some amendments in Malaysian constitution were introduced on education system; among them some articles affect the Islamic education system. For instance - Article 12 of Malaysia Federal Constitution extends such religious freedom to the purview of education, but specifies only Islamic institutions as lawful for the Federation or state to establish, maintain and assist in establishing or maintaining (Mat Diah, 1989). The Federation or a state is also empowered to provide, or assist in providing, Islamic religious instruction and incur expenditure as may be necessary for the purpose (Harper, 1999).

Article 11 which is known as the basic clause on religious freedom grants on every person the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion, but the propagation of any religious principle or belief among Muslims may be controlled or restricted by state law, or in respect of the Federal Territory, by federal law. As a result, not only are non-Muslim missionary activities subject to strict directive or even prohibition in the states, but Muslim missionaries must also obtain a letter of authority from state religious departments. The proposed article also approves all religious groups to administer their own religious matters, to set up and continue institutions for religious or charitable purposes and to acquire, possess, hold and administer property in accordance with the law. Extension of such religious freedom to the preview of education has been approved by article 12, but it specifies only Islamic institutions as legitimate for the Federation or state to establish, preserve and assist in establishing or maintaining. The Federation or a state is also empowered to provide, or assist in providing, Islamic religious instruction and incur expenditure as may be necessary for the purpose.

However, the overall education system has been consigned under federal jurisdiction (Ninth Schedule) but Islamic procedural administration been listed under the jurisdiction of states. But the reality is - the Federal Constitution does not oblige the various states to proclaim Islam as their official religion. The sequence of administration of Muslim Law directs according to the states government regulations; the various states have instituted Councils of the Islamic Religion (*Majlis Agama Islam*) to support and direct the sultans in their capacity as heads of the Islamic religion, On the other hand the matters of Islamic education and other daily affairs of Muslims and *shari'ah* are handled by Departments of Islamic Religious Affairs (*Jabatan Agama Islam*) (Hamid, 2009). On the whole, claims a legal expert, "the provision that Islam is the religion of the Federation has little significance" (Ibrahim, 1985: 216).

For Islamic schooling, it was recommended that religious instructions will be provided at public expense in any school with no fewer than 15 Muslim pupils was reported on the seminal Razak of 1956. However, the state is not financially liable for schooling in other religions which were proposed as additional subjects, for them no compulsion was exerted on pupils without the express permission from their parents. The Razak Report's proposals found tangible form in the 1957 Education Ordinance, which allotted two hours per week for Islamic lessons, which were to be delivered by teachers approved by the various states religious authorities (Ishak, 1995).

Another amendment was introduced on 1957 upon the Islamic Education Ordinance 1952, which is not widely appreciated from all corners due its failure to fully slot in Islamic religious knowledge into the mainstream curriculum of government schools. On this consequent, the Education Act of 1961 endorsed the national educational system and private Islamic schools and gave the direction in the curricula of private madrasahs. By this time, Malay language replaced Arabic as the medium of instruction in all subjects except Arabic itself. Despite the widening of the madrasahs' syllabi, their constrained budget meant they were on the losing side vis-à-vis government schools as far as attracting highly qualified teachers and providing instructional facilities were concerned (Hashim and Langgulung, 2008). A new declaration came from the then Prime Minister Tun Razak in 1972, which states the Islamic ideology on government actions in both domestic and international affairs had been guided by Islam, and that the New Economic Policy (NEP) itself found guidance from the Quran. However, to synchronize federal efforts at systematizing Islamic education, a separate Religious Education Division (*Bahagian Pelajaran Agama*) was established within the Ministry of Education in 1973 (Hamid, 2000).

Although Bangladesh was declared to be a democratic and secular state upon its independence, in 1972, however, Islam was declared to be the state religion, and the country has turned increasingly religious since then. Since gaining independence, the *madrasa* system has played an important historical role by preserving the orthodox tradition of Islam in the wake of the downfall of Muslim political power; by training generations of Islamic religious scholars and functionaries; by providing vigorous religio-political leadership; and, more

importantly, by reawakening the consciousness of Islamic solidarity and the Islamic way of life among the Muslims of South Asia (Ahmad, n.d.).

An independent body named, The Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board, funded by the government that is charged with establishing madrasas. The functions of this authority also covered- assigning teachers and formulating the curriculum of Islamic education. The *Madrasa* Board also authorized to mandate teaching subjects like English, Bangla, Science, Social Studies, Mathematics, Geography, History and other modified version of Islamic syllabi. It is structured in five levels – *ibtida'i* (primary), *dakhil* (secondary), *alim* (higher secondary), *fazil* (graduate), and *kamil* (post-graduate). Most of the *Madrasas* are run by individuals or a group of persons and financial support usually come from individual or collection of donations from society though they receive government support. The government of Bangladesh pays 80 per cent of the salaries of non-government *Madrasa* teachers and administrators and a significant part of their development expenditure, provides scholarships and books, and assigns a substantial sum to the construction of additional private *Madrasas*. But the government support enjoys by *Aliya madrasas* not *Quomi madrasas*. The majority of the graduates of the *Aliya madrasa* system pursues a higher education or joins the job market (Ahsan, 1990).

For the first time, the elementary level *madrasas* known as *ibtida'i madrasas* endorsed in 1978 by former president Zia-ur-Rahman. The Madrasa Education Board has approved only 5,150 of all independent *ibtida'i madrasas*, with 23,176 teachers and 377,749 students. But a report in the Daily Dinkal on March 2, 1998 suggested the existence of 18,000 independent *ibtida'i madrasas* with 85,000 teachers and close to two million students. This number is doubled in these days (Ahmad, n.d.). This latter figure should be closer to reality since a 1992 Ministry of Education estimate puts the total number of *ibtida'i madrasas* at 17,279. At any rate, the important thing to note here is: a) the significant contribution of *ibtida'i madrasas* in providing elementary education in areas where no government primary schools are available) that these *ibtida'i madrasas* are now acting as feeder institutions for both the *Aliya* and *Quomi madrasas*. More than 50 percent of students in *Quomi madrasas* and more than 70 percent of students in *Aliya madrasas* come from an *ibtida'i* background (Ahmad, n.d.).

In Bangladesh, majority of *Quomi madrasa* students (82 percent) come from poor families of rural areas and small towns. Sylhet, Chittagong, and some northern districts have traditionally been the main base of recruitment for the *Quomi madrasas*. The student body of the *Aliya madrasa* system is much more diverse and includes a large number of students from the lower middle classes as well. Institutional changes have become more significant in the post-independence era, as the changed political context has created a series of symbolic and institutional linkages (e.g., shared religious symbols; government and private-sponsored Islamic educational and cultural activities, projects, and advisory institutions; political parties and elected assemblies; and communication media, particularly the growing vernacular press) that facilitate interaction between the *ulama* and the modern educated elite. It is rather surprising that these interactions (especially in the context of an increasingly mature democratic political process in Bangladesh) have not so far created a measure of shared intellectual space and a common language of religious discourse between the *ulama* and the modern-educated Muslim intellectuals (Karim, 2004).

The present status of Islamic schooling in Malaysia and Bangladesh:

In Malaysia, students with potential for excellence in religious subjects are allowed to proceed to higher education via the Higher Religious Certificate of Malaysia (STAM, *Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia*) since 2000, when Arabic-medium curriculum has been streamlined with *Ma'had Bu'uth al-Islamiah* of Al Azhar University, Cairo. STAM offers a pathway to tertiary education in Islamic studies faculties in universities in Malaysia and abroad. STAM also offered students of independent religious schools (SARs) and state-government religious schools (SMANs), who's in the process of streamlining their syllabi, to be in sync with STAM instead of the Malay-medium Higher Religious Certificate (STA, *Sijil Tinggi Agama*) examinations (Yusopp, 2003; Yaacob, 2003; The Star, 2009).

On the other hand, Islamic subjects features as part of the curriculum on moral-cum-values education in conventional primary and secondary education in national and vernacular national-type schools.. For six years at primary level and five years at secondary level, Muslim pupils were given such doses of Islamic knowledge for two hours per week. From being an originally elective subject at secondary level, greater weightage was later given to *Agama* (religion) as a subject whose grade was considered for aggregation at the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM/MCE, *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*) level and also counted towards entry into teachers' training colleges (Abdul-Kadir, 1994).

At this moment in time, at lower secondary level—for students aged 13 to 15—students may choose Islamic education or Moral Education as one of their electives; the core subjects being Malay language, English language, Science, History, Geography and Mathematics. However, at higher secondary level—for students aged 16 to 17—Islamic education or Moral Education forms one of the compulsory subjects, besides Malay

language, English language, Mathematics and History. In addition, the Agama stream is accepted as one of the three specialized streams in secondary education, the other two being the academic stream (science or arts) and the technical and vocational stream. Since the 1980s, additional core subjects have been introduced to bolster secondary level Islamic education as a whole. Four of them, viz. Higher Arabic language, *Tasawwur* Islam, *Al-Quran* and *Al-Sunnah* education and Islamic *Shari'ah* education—all introduced in 1992—also serve as electives for students of the two non-Agama streams (Abdul-Kadir, 1994).

Malaysian Islamic education system has been categorized between state-sponsored Islamic education and private funded Islamic education. However, in national schools, some Islamic courses also taught via the Islamic education subject, the religious stream in selected schools and a value-based curriculum that excels the different modern arts and sciences subjects. On the other hand, Islamic education also comes to light in religious schools that employ an overtly Islamic-based curriculum. The route of prescribed Islamic education has been defined by the obsession to centralize, under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, the administration and curricula of all schools that offer some kind of Islamic education (Hamid, 2009).

The additions of the official curriculum to cover up SMANs, SMARs and SMASs and their registration under the Ministry of Education forming a main point of government policy with respect to Islamic education under the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006–2010), the conduit towards a uniform explanation of Islam in Malaysia in future years has been formed (Hashim & Langgulong, 2008; Hamid, 2009).

In Bangladesh, dual system of *Madrassa* exists at present (i) *Quomi madrasas* with number of more than 6,500 (<http://www.bmeb.gov.bd/>). These *Quomi madrasas* in Bangladesh, which are predominantly of Deobandi persuasion, teach the standard *Dars-i-Nizami* prevalent in all South Asian *madrasas*. The *Quomi madrasas* are private, receive no financial support from the government, and supported by religious endowments or by *zakat* (alms), *sadaqa* (charity), and donations from the faithful. This financial autonomy of the *madrassa* system has been a major source of the independent religio-political power base of the *ulama* in Bangladesh. It has also enabled the *ulama* to resist the efforts of state authorities to introduce reforms in the *madrassa* system and to bridge the gap between the traditional system of Islamic education and modern secular education.

Recently there has been taken a remarkable attempts to establish “modern type” *Madrassas*; even at a very small scale but it can be credited. One is the establishment of English medium *Madrassas*, which allows admission only to college graduates and has a condensed five-year course of Islamic studies. The other is called as Cadet *Madrassa*, which mingles all subjects of conventional college education with the usual Islamic sciences, using English as the medium of instruction for general subjects and Arabic for Islamic religious subjects. The quality of teaching in these two *Madrassas* is even better than that of public or private sector colleges. These two excellent attempts have initiated from private sector without any financial and logistical support from government i.e., these *madrassas* seemed to have emerged in response to the increasing demand for English-speaking, modern-educated *ulama* to act as *imams* (leader of Muslims daily prayer) and *khatibs* (giving sermon during Friday prayer) for the Bangladeshi expatriate communities in the United Kingdom and North America. Another such example is that of a Nadva-linked *madrassa* in southern part of Bangladesh; where both Arabic and English are used as the medium of instruction and more than 90 percent of the students merge in the modern educational stream upon graduation from the *madrassa* (Hossain, 2007).

There are some exemplary initiatives have been adopted in recent time frame in the Islamic schooling system in Bangladesh. For instance, Urdu was used as a teaching language for some courses but then replaced by Bangla. Bangla grammar and literature has also been declared as a compulsory subject. Subjects of Arts such as Political science, History, Economics and Comparative religion taught in the light of Islamic vision have been included in recent Bengali events. To increase language proficiency, Bengala and English language has been made compulsory both in *Quomi* and *Aliya madrasas*.

Conclusion:

The emergence of Islamic education in both countries, Malaysia and Bangladesh, was extremely significant. In Bangladesh, the Islamic schooling came into sight with limitless effort of *Sufis* or saints. While in Malaysia, *Sultan* (monarchy) played a vital role to extend the Islamic education. In Bangladesh, Islamic education spread due to the significant support of common people as a result the leaders or social aristocrats were bound to ease the broaden the scope of Muslim religious education preaching. As in Malaysia, the prime person, the *Sultan* is responsible to uphold and protect of the Islamic ideology so the Islamic education system was spread with full support of state. There is a similarity in between both countries – the leaderships was and are always supposed to in the favor to protect Islamic education principles as they need the support of the majority of their countrymen.

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