

MADRASAS IN BENGAL

A legacy of learning and the challenge of change

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Historically, Bengal has had a rich tradition of madrasas, as evidenced by numerous inscriptions across the region. They played a pivotal role in diffusing education and creating a class of ‘ulama’ (scholars) who spread learning throughout the region together with the sufis (spiritual mentors). Madrasas were necessary for creating a large pool of educated professionals to fill various social, administrative, and official positions and ranks in both government and private sectors. Consequently, they had a long-term effect on the social, economic, and cultural growth of the region.

These institutions played the same role that modern educational institutions, such as universities and colleges, play in our contemporary period. The educated elite from madrasas assumed various roles and responsibilities in society. Thus, qadis would act as teachers and imams, while ‘ulama’ would also be engaged in scientific investigation or in medical practice. Minhaj al-Din Siraj provides us with some information about the establishment of madrasas in Bengal by the early Muslim rulers. Inscriptions offer information on the locations, dates of construction, names



Remains of a madrasa located near the historic Badshahi Road, in the vicinity of Sonalti, Purbasthali, Purba Bardhaman.

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Map illustrating the historical growth and geographical distribution of madrasa institutions across medieval Bengal.

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of patrons, and so on, and help us identify centres of learning. In some cases, this information sheds light on links between various institutions, the transmission of ideas, student-teacher connections, and intellectual genealogies.

There were many famous madrasas, madrasa-baris, and dars-baris (i.e., schools and colleges; dars means lesson, bari in Bengali means house or building) throughout the country, where learning flourished. Congregational mosques often served as centres of higher learning, and masjids frequently functioned as maktabas, as they still do in many cases.

An early inscription from Naohata, from the reign of Balka Khan (626–628 AH, 1229–1231 AD), records such a mosque that also served as an advanced academy in the region, where scholarly issues were debated and discussed. Epigraphic texts suggest that the capital, Gaur, evolved as one of the earliest intellectual and cultural centres in the north. It had numerous mosques (more than fifty mosque inscriptions have been discovered in the area), madrasas, and khanqahs as early as the thirteenth century. Another early capital of the north, Hadrat Pandua (similarly rich in inscriptions), also became a prosperous cultural centre, where many mosques and madrasas flourished.

In eastern Bengal, Sonārgā’oṇ (near Dhaka) became a famous educational centre after the arrival of the renowned Hanbali scholar Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Abū Tawwama in the middle of the fourteenth century. Abū Tawwama’s fame attracted many students to the Sonārgā’oṇ madrasa from different corners of the Islamic world. Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Yahyā Manerī, who became a well-known sufi figure of the Subcontinent, also attended this madrasa. Tandah, Rajmahal, Murshidabad, and Jahangirnagar

(today’s Dhaka) became noted centres of learning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In northern Bengal, Ghoraghat, in the present district of Dinajpur, attracted many ‘ulama’ and students during the Mughal period. In southwest Bengal, Tribeni and Chhoto Pandua (in the present district of Hooghly) had a number of madrasas (the earliest one, Dar al-Khayrat, was established around 713AH/1313AD according to an inscription) during the Sultanate period. The town of Mangalkot (in the present district of Burdwan), not far from Tribeni, also earned fame as a great seat of learning, a reputation it maintained until the nineteenth century. In the southeast corner of Bengal, Chittagong evolved as the main educational centre, where the Madrasa Muhsiniyyah in the nineteenth century and the Hathazari madrasa in the twentieth century played a crucial role in spreading Islamic education.

The cultural interactions of the Bengal Sultanate often surpassed the political and geographical boundaries of South Asia. Many ‘ulama’ and sufis travelled from Central Asia, Asia Minor, and the Arab world and settled in Bengal. Some of the madrasas and khanqahs that they established attracted students from various parts of the old world. Sultan A’zam Shah had two madrasas built during 1410–11, one near the Umm al-Hani gate (situated on al-Rukn al-Yamani or Yamani corner) of the Grand Mosque at Makkah, and the other near Bab al-Salam (the Gate of Peace) of the Prophet’s mosque at Madinah. He also endowed a large property to support these two institutions, which were considered among the best seminaries in the region during that period.

Renowned scholars, such as Shaykh Taqi al-Din al-Fasi (1374–1428), a pioneer in the field of epigraphy, taught

the Maliki school of fiqh (jurisprudence) at the al-Madrasa al-Sultaniyyah al-Ghiyathiyah al-Bangaliyyah (named after its Bengali patron, al-Sultan Ghiyath al-Din A’zam Shah) in Makkah. Construction of this madrasa began in the month of Ramadan in 1411 and was finally completed in 1412. A number of scholars from the family of Shibi (who became famous through their educational and scholarly activities in Makkah during the fifteenth century) taught at this madrasa.

A few prominent international scholars attached to this madrasa, as mentioned by al-Fasi, were Qadi Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Qashri (d. 1414), Shihab al-Din Abu ‘l-Khayr Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Saghani (d. 1422), Qadi Muhy al-Din ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni al-Fasi (d. 1424), and Shaykh Abi ‘l-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Ahmad al-Mardini al-Haskafi (d. 1422). The syllabus of this madrasa covered the four famous schools of Islamic jurisprudence, which, in a way, indicates the liberal policy and religious tolerance that prevailed in Bengal.

Sultan Jalal al-Din (r. 1414–33), the heir-apparent from the house of Ganesha, also sent generous endowments to Makkah and Madinah to establish two madrasas there, which came to be known as al-Madrasa al-Bangaliyyah over time, and set a precedent for the globalisation of the name “Bangala” in those days. Bengali students often travelled for their religious training to famous centres of learning in Jaunpur and Delhi, and sometimes as far away as Khurasan, Central Asia, and Arabia. The Dar al-‘Ulum in Deoband, Mazahir al-‘Ulum in Saharanpur, Madrasa

Mulla Nizam al-Din of Aurangzeb’s time), in which special emphasis was given to the Hanafi fiqh. At times, these institutions contributed significantly to promoting al-‘ulum al-naqliyyah (namely, classical religious scholarship) as well as al-‘ulum al-‘aqliyyah (rational knowledge or sciences).

After the first war of independence in 1857, the vast majority of ‘ulama’ focused their attention on theological education only, which they considered an alternative to armed struggle against colonial rule or jihad. They regarded this effort to equip the younger generation with educational empowerment as a form of lesser jihad (a struggle to establish justice), albeit a passive one, as it neglected the modern sciences and focused solely on classical religious scholarship. Undoubtedly, the changing political environment led these ‘ulama’ to follow this passive path, as the participation of many of them in the jihad movement had made the colonial powers suspicious of their activities, and madrasa institutions came under special scrutiny.

Most of the pre-colonial madrasas during Muslim rule were supported by endowments until the East India Company passed orders in 1828 to acquire all awqaf (endowments) of madrasas, depriving these institutions completely of their main source of income. The final blow came during the time of Lord Harding, when he passed a law in 1844 forbidding graduates of Persian and Arabic (non-governmental Islamic) madrasas from being given employment in government. Even the official jobs of qadi (justice) with the government, previously exclusively

it became famous as Calcutta ‘Alia madrasa, which is still in operation today (with a recent change in its name as ‘Alia University). In this institution, secular subjects such as Bengali and English language and literature were added. Later, all government-sponsored madrasas which taught this new curriculum became known as ‘aliya madrasas (literally: higher institutes). Though they were not popular initially with the mainstream rural Muslim population, as they received support from the British raj, slowly and gradually, ‘aliya madrasas spread throughout Bengal. Since independence, ‘aliya madrasas have spread further in the region; thousands of students graduate from ‘aliya madrasas every year.

At the end, one has to accept the fact that the institution of the madrasa, which once contributed greatly to the growth of intellectual and scientific advancement in the old world for nearly a millennium or so, adopted a closed-door policy during the past few centuries, reducing its sphere of academic interest to the study of some outdated classical Islamic scholarship, which is completely irrelevant to the needs of the day.

One classical example of blind adherence to the outdated tradition (تقليد) is the peculiar use of the Arabic phrase (قوله منادى منادى) of the Prophet (PBUH), which translates as ‘Sultan is the shadow of Allah on the earth, and to disgrace him amounts to disgracing Allah’. It is used in Friday congregational sermons (khutba al-Jum’a قبة جمعة) in many parts of South Asia (and the neighbouring regions). This Arabic metaphor, which never existed during the time of the Prophet (PBUH) or in the successive period, must have been skillfully and ingeniously introduced by the ruling class to legitimise their rule inherited through kingship. Its strange continuance, even after the lapse of sultanate rule long ago, followed by a long interval of European colonial rule for nearly two centuries, is an eye-opening example of the irrational blind adherence of some traditional societies to certain fixed ritualistic texts, even if they do not make any sense. The use of this Arabic phrase, though not prescribed by the Prophet (PBUH), indicates the illogical attachment of conservatives as well as dogmatists to a set of fixed sacred texts without scrutinising their relevance to time and space. Obviously, this is one of the detrimental factors to the future growth and development of any society, spiritually, religiously, and intellectually.

The time has come to adapt the madrasa curriculum to the challenges of our modern time, embracing the modern advances in logic (قانون), philosophy (فلسفة), scholarly reasoning (تدقيق), and other fields, as was tradition in the past. Even the theological study in the madrasa can be developed in line with the scientific study of religion followed in many advanced institutions in the developed world. It is high time that madrasa education should gradually move out from the narrow dogmatic approach based on certain stereotyped sectarian views of religion and move towards a more creative and innovative approach in the field of Islamic Studies.

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Excavated remains of the Darasbari Madrasa, located between two tanks in the Ghoshpur mauza of Gaur-Lakhnawti, southwest of the Kotwali Darwaza.

Rahmaniya in Delhi, and Nadwat al-‘Ulama’ in Lucknow attracted many students from Bengal during the colonial period and afterwards. Many of the ‘ulama’ who graduated from madrasas in North India, and at times in Central and West Asia, returned to establish their own madrasas in Bengal, a tradition that still continues.

Most of these madrasas followed a model known as al-Madrasa al-Nizamiyya, which first appeared in Baghdad, Nishapur, and many other important cities in Khurasan under the patronage of Nizam al-Mulk, the famous intellectual Abbasside vizier, in the eleventh century. Soon afterward, these institutions spread to the central and eastern parts of the Islamic world, from Anatolia in the West to Bengal in the East. In South Asia, the curriculum was known as Dars-i-Nizami (after

reserved for madrasa graduates, were now offered only to those formally trained in British law. Still, the colonial power could not completely override local custom, law, and culture, since they needed to understand them to run their administration smoothly. To find a solution, they embarked on introducing a new curriculum and institutions which would accommodate both classical and modern education, effectively serving the needs of the British administration without abruptly upsetting the traditional values of local communities.

Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century, a new curriculum was introduced under government patronage at Calcutta madrasa, which was established in 1781 during the time of Governor-General Warren Hastings (1773–84). With the passage of time,