



Madrassa-An Islamic System of Education In Kerala and Tamil Nadu – A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Madrassas, apart from imparting religious education, influences the socio-cultural aspect of a person. With an established recognition board, syllabus, Curriculum, and training programme for Madrassa teachers, they have become integral part of the Muslim Community in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The present paper explains the Madrassa System of Education with special reference to Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: The Madrassa system, *dars*, religious jurisprudence, *makthabs*, *maulanas*, *Ooothuppalli*.

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Introduction

The Madrassa system had effectively influenced the religious reformation of the Tamil Muslim Community. From the ancient time onwards madrassa holds an undisputable influence on molding the lives and behavior of Muslims. During the period of prophet Muhammed, the madrassa's accomplished their primary duty of religious instructions in the Arabian peninsula. In India, Madrassa got the prominence during the Muslim Sultan's reign. They patronized madrassa education. In the rural and urban areas, Madrassa was established and maintained with the help of village heads and *mukya*. Apart from a religious institution, Madrassa also influences the socio-cultural aspect of a person. Thus the madrassa provides higher education and value-oriented religious instructions.

The term madrassa originally came from the Arabic term *dars* which means a "lecture"¹. We all know that the madrassa and masjids are entirely separated according to their religious duty and rituals. Masjids are used as a place for religious ritual performances and other prayers, whereas madrassa is an educational institution. Sometimes madrassa works within the premises of the masjid or near to it and in some cases, madrassa and masjids are found within a single limit. Most of the Madrassa in India can be considered as the cultural centre of that town or street, especially during the festival occasions, these places became a centre of getting together for peoples of all sects.

Admission to Madrassas

Students are admitted to madrassa only after the completion of their primary study from the *makthabs*. Eligible students are admitted to madrassa and are provided with religious education under *maulanas* in various fields of religious jurisprudence. Even though the Muslim king's encouraged madrassa education, a separate department for education was not formed during their era. So the working of the madrassa was difficult during the medieval period. In Tamil Nadu, many madrassas were worked with the patronage of some rich lords², even though the madrassa provided fully free education, sometimes they accepted hadiya and donations from the students. These students are also provided with special food and accommodation by the madrassa management.

The Curriculum and Syllabus of Madrassas

Apart from religious instructions, secular subjects are also taught in the madrassa. The syllabus includes *hadith*, Islamic *shariah*, *Fatwa*, Quranic interpretation, philosophy, science, history, Sufism, and *da'wa*. Apart from teaching, this syllabus also concluded serious discussions on the subjects. The syllabus also includes discussions, speech, analyses, etc are the specialty of madrassa education.

Historical Background

Sufism was popular in South India even before the military campaign of Sultan Alavudheen Khilji and his companions Malik Kafur, Sufism was popular in South India. Many Sufis had moved and settled in the South even before the campaign. *Madurai* was invaded by Malik Kafur in 1310AD, even before that, *Sheikh Nathan Auliya* of Thiruchirappali had established his legacy of Sufi tradition in the area. his disciple *Sheikh Baba Fakrudheen* had traveled in the villages and towns of South India, especially in Tamil Nadu. At last, he established his Sufi Centre in Ponkunda of Ananthpur District. These centres were known as *Kan* and *Kah's*, and they became the religious-cultural Centre of South India. During this period, the Karnataka region also witnessed the development of the madrassa system and religious activities, apart from religious activities, Arabic and Persian languages were spread in the Carnatic region³. Many North Indian Persian Scholars had migrated and settled in South India. Simultaneously, during this time Urdu was also popularized in South India and Tamil Nadu. Urdu was taught in Madrassa of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and within the borders of Kerala. The rulers of that period patronized the Urdu language, and at a time it became a popularly spoken medium after the vernacular language. During the British period, they established a madrassa in the city of Madras, and later it was converted into an Arabic language study centre.

Earlier Indian Religious Institutions in Malabar and Ma'abar

Religious Institutions came into existence in India at the Malabar and Ma'abar regions of Southern India. This area was frequented by Arab traders much before the advent of Islam. The rulers of the area witnessed the arrival of companions and Tabi'yeen. While conducting research, this Investigator had the privilege of visiting the tombs of the companions buried in the soil of Inchigode, District of Kasargod and also had the privilege to see the documents preserved there. In addition, historian Farishta reports that the Malabar Ruler, Zaymorhad, had the distinction of embracing Islam while the Prophet was alive. Muhammad Ali Athar states that the real name of the Malabar Ruler was Bhaskar Ravi Varma, with the title of "Cheraman Perumal", who after embracing Islam built Masjids for propagating the faith and made arrangements for imparting religious instructions in these Masjids. The arrangement survives from the period of the companions and Tabi'yeen to the present day. Renowned traveler, Ibn Batuta, had also mentioned this fact in his travelogue. These institutions are called "Palli" in the regional language of Malyalam. The areas of Kadangular, Panani, Kolam, Kasargod, Trungadi and Calicut of the State of Kerala, we find the ruins of Ancient Masjids can be seen. These places maintain the tradition of imparting religious education in that areas.

Madrassa Education System and the Kerala Muslim Community

Madrassa cannot be considered as a religious institution when it comes to Kerala. Apart from that it stands still as a socio-cultural and educational institution in the State. In Kerala, a madrassa stands as a socio-cultural educational institution of a village. With the early establishment of masjids, the madrassa also functioned, during the early days the functioning of the Madrassa was centered in the Masjids. Madrassa had a good influence over Kerala Muslim Community, especially in the Malabar region of the state.

The advent of Islam in Malabar can be traced back to the period of Prophet Muhammed, the historical maritime connection of the Kerala with Arabian Peninsula had a great influence over the Kerala society. According to popular belief Malik Ibnu Dinar, an Islamic preacher and companion of the Prophet had arrived in Kerala in the 7th Century. Dinar and his companions traveled throughout Kerala as part of missionary activities and

established 10 Masjids. These masjids are established in the coastal belts of the Malabar⁴, and it is to be noted that, these events had happened in the era of the Prophet, and even though Islam is in its early period and it is not spread beyond the Arabian Peninsula. All masjids are the centre of Islamic preaches, it is done under the leadership of a religious head named 'Qazi', he is in charge of religious rituals and also he teaches the religious jurisprudence and Quran. He used to preach basic tenets of religion to the people, especially newly converted Muslims.

The Madrassa system can be differentiated into three forms. 1. Makthab (*Oothuppali*), 2. Dars, and 3. Madrassa. These are an integral part of the madrassa system in the Kerala Islamic community. These institutions had reformed and exerted good influence over the Socio-Cultural background of the Kerala Muslim community. It is to be noted that, the oldest masjids in Kerala are both centers of worship and education. Especially the Masjids situated in the Coastal belt. These masjids provided religious education to local fishermen in the coastal area.

1. **Makthabh** (Oothuppali): Oothuppalli or Makthabs are the primary institutions with a single instructor. These forms of primary religious institutions are run by masjids in every village and town. The main instructor in the makthabs will be the *imam* (Chief Priest) of the masjid. The students may call him 'Ustad'. The primary lessons of the Arabic Language including scripts are taught in Oothuppalli. The main subjects taught in makthab include- the Quran, its interpretations, hadith, Islamic History, Islamic Da'wah activities and Fathwas of Shari'ah. Celebrations according to the Hijri calendar are also conducted in makthabs. It also includes students from surrounding Mahals, Oothu Madangal (Brahminical gurukuls) are similar to oothuppalli.
2. **Dars**: It is also another form of religious study centered on masjids. Plenty of scholars (Muthallim) were taught under priests. Quran, Hadith, and Islamic History are the main area of study. This type of education system is residential form and it is centered in Masjid from early days to modern days, masjids are planned multistoried, the ground floor is rendered for usual religious rituals, and the other floors are rendered for the activities of dars. The *muthuallims* were given institutions and accommodation inside the masjids. The second floor of these masjids is used as a classroom and a place of discussions and speech which may last a fortnight. These speeches may include a variety of topics of theology and day-to-day affairs; they may form discussion groups and conduct debates on different issues. The second floor is simultaneously used as the classroom and for accommodation and it is the specialty of *Dars* which memorize the *Gurukula* system. A *muthuallim* from the *Dars* may take leave to his home on special occasions, for that he may have the permission from the main tutor of the Dars. The education and accommodation including food in Dars are provided free of cost, the Masjid management is in charge of the Governing of Dars. An interesting fact is that the Dars students are considered guests by the nearby houses. These houses sponsor or provide food. These forms of Dars system are prevailing in Kerala from the early time. It can be considered as a good form of a practical form of education. The ponnani masjid is considered as an important Dars centre. This Dars was opened in the 15th century by the Zainudhin Ibnu Ahamed Ma'bari of Ponnani. He was the Qazi of Ponnani and opened Dars in Ponnani, which later became the capital of Islamic education in Kerala⁵. He had started an established structure of Dars education.
3. **Madrassa**: The pioneer form of Madrassa was established by the *Sheikh Zainuddheen Maqdoom* of Ponnani in 1510. AD. This madrassa opened a great opportunity for

religious education to the scholars⁶. Traditionally, the educational system of Muslims of Kerala is called “*Vilakkathirikkuka*” it is a form of studying by sitting around a lamp. Still, now the age-old practice of *vilakkathirikkuka* is practiced in Ponnani Juma Masjid. With the effort of Puthiya Maliyekkal Pookoya Thangal, The Ponnani *Mounathul Islam Sabha* was established in 1900, under this sabha, many educational institutions including colleges and Madrassa are still running successfully⁷.

Kerala had a wide structure of the Madrassa system with an established recognition board, syllabus, Curriculum, and training programme for Madrassa teachers. In the early days, Madrassa were established by the noble family of that village. Most of the children in that village may depend on these Madrassa for their Islamic religious study. The governance of the Madrassa including the remuneration of Moulavi’s are paid by the noble families in the village. Usually, children of four years are admitted to madrassas in Kerala. That is even before entering the school, the children start to the primary lessons of Socio-disciplines from the Madrassa. At the primary levels, Arabic scripts and letters are taught along with lessons and stories from Quran at present, every Muslim association in Kerala runs Madrassa, among them the Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidhyabhyasa Board is the leading education board with ten thousand Madrassa, Sunni Vidhyabhyasa Board, Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen, Mujahid Students Movement, Jamath Islami Al Hind, Dakshina Kerala Jam iyathul Ulama are the other associations which run Madrassa in Kerala, These institutions had become an integral part of Kerala Muslim community and had reformed the community.

Conclusion

No other aspect of Indian Education is perhaps as complicated and controversial as the one connected with moral and religious instructions in schools and colleges. During recent years, the growing indiscipline, the lack of ideals and the weakening of social and moral values among the younger generation, have caused grave concern in many countries of the world, including India. This has prompted the government of these countries to reconsider their educational policies and give their educational system a proper value-orientation. As the Kothari Commission says, “The adoption of a secularist policy means that in political, economic and social matters, all citizens, irrespective of their religious faith, will enjoy equality of rights but it does not mean an irreligious or antireligious policy. It does not belittle the importance of religious values as such. It gives every citizen the fullest freedom of religious beliefs and worship. It is anxious to ensure good relations amongst the different religious groups and to promote, not only religious tolerance but also an active reverence for all religions. Moral and spiritual education must, therefore, form an essential part of our curriculum. It is now being felt and rightly too, that the absence of any concerted effort to impart some sort of moral and spiritual training in schools and colleges, is a serious defect in our present educational system.

End Notes

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