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SOME NOTES ON MADRASAH EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: A HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to describe a historical development on Madrasah education system in Bangladesh. Bangladesh or formerly known as East Pakistan has significant contribution in spreading Islam in Asia. In education level, this major role played by thousands of Madrasah (state or private) in Bangladesh. While some people argued that the alumni of the Madrasah are inferior to the alumni of Western education institutions, the history proved that the alumni of Madrasah have substantial contribution in creating Muslim scholars not only expertise in religious teaching but also in secular sciences. This analysis also expected to be a role model in comparing Madrasah education system in Indonesia.

Keywords

*Madrasah;
Education;
Bangladesh;
Western
Education*

INTRODUCTION

According to Machasin (in Karim, 2003), South Asia or the more popularly known as India, is known since long ago as the country with a very old cultural heritage. When Islam came to this Indian Sub-continent, the community or the children of men there for thousands of years formed civilization. Social systems, religious teachings, the natural sciences, mathematics, astronomy, and others already rooted there very long time ago.

Islam at the beginning (at the time of Prophet Muhammad SAW) came to the subcontinent precisely on the Malabar Coast through cultural assimilation and then followed by military forces. Since Muhammad ibn Qasim, the commander of the Governor-General The East (*al-Masyriq*), under Hajjaj ibn Yusuf during the Umayyad Caliph, al-Walid I (705-715 AD) conquered western India, Pakistan precisely now, the people there with joy embraced Islam. Ibn Qasim's personality who applied the teachings of Islam with full of justice and humanity, became the main attraction for the people there to embrace

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Islam. In addition, the propagandist (*da'i*) of Islam take an active role in shaping the Islamic society. Ibn Qasim (711-715 AD) ruled with the principle "from the people, by the people, and for the people." Institutions/educational communities and Islamic teachings which he applied in Sind and Punjab still rooted in Pakistan and some areas of India. The next period, the Muslims came to India repeatedly, such as Ghazni Dynasty, Ghuri, Delhi Sultanate, and the era of the Mughal Empire. Mughal Empire ended with British colonial presence. Then the people of India's independence from the British by becoming two countries, namely Pakistan and India. Further, East Pakistan broke away from West Pakistan which we now know as The People's Republic of Bangladesh (Kaya, 1980: 1-3; Nainar, 1956: 9-10).

Bangladesh is one of the country formerly known as East Pakistan, later on separated from the political center of West Pakistan in 1971 AD. This country is in contact with the other three sides of the state border that is India, Myanmar in the southeast, and the Bay of Bengal in the south. Its wide is equal to the islands of Java and Madura. In comparison, the land area of Bangladesh is the one fifteenth land area of the Republic of Indonesia. The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim (90%, 1980 census, its population is now around 155 million people), Hanafi's school oriented and political system of democracy patterned parliamentary system (Bangladesh Islamic Foundation Board, 1981: 10).

Long before the present of Islam brought by the Prophet Muhammad, the Indian sub-continent has a harmonious relationship with the Arab traders who spread Islam while trading. This is in accordance with the words of the Prophet: "Convey you [the teachings of Islam] even if one verse" (at-Tibrīzī & Robson, 1965). With the motto and the teachings of Islam, the Arab traders Islamize the population of Kadangalar, Malabar Coast.

As already mentioned above, further development of Islam formally occurs when Commander Muhammad ibn Qasim conquered the kingdom of Raja Dahir, a famous tyrant king, and occurs between the upper caste hegemony with a low caste. There is also a lack of harmonious relations between Arab and India, as the Persian king Raja Dahir assist in the war between the army in Khurasan Caliph Uthman ibn Affan by the Persians. The next era, Dahir even protect dissidents Umayyad Caliphate (Wheeler, 1992: 60-61). In addition, hijack Saudi ship coming from Jaziratul Yaqu ("Java") (Ali, 1973: 2-3; A. Karim, 1974: 10-11).

Ibn Qasim managed to leave a good impression, that Islam is a religion of peace and there is no compulsion in religion. As a result, until now Muslims live in this region, although Muslims in India are now being minority (approximately 12-15% of the total population of India). The preacher of Islam teaches traditional religion, in the future this patterns of the traditional religious teaching became an embryo for the birth of madrasah education model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Madrasah In The Glory Era of Islam

After Islam spreads outside the Arabian Peninsula and developed in three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe). Then gradually established religious schools or madrasah. Madrasah was firstly established at the time of Amir Abdur Rahman al-Dakhil of the independent

Umayyad Dynasty II in the year of 785 AD in Cordova (Yatim, 1993: 95). Perhaps this is the first time in the history of Islamic madrasah formally established under the auspices of the government.

Later in the period of Amir Abdur Rahman II (822-852 AD), madrasah became Islamic universities/colleges, which later evolved rapidly during Caliph Hakam II (961-976 AD) in Cordova, a Muslim ruler known as a lover of science who successfully established 17 universities in Andalusia. In Cordova itself there already have Board of Professors as a responsible institution for education. In Morocco there also madrasah that evolved become colleges in the ninth century AD. Similarly, in Cairo stands the University of al-Azhar (which still exist and becomes one of the leading Islamic university in the world) that was built in 983 AD during Caliph Abdul Aziz (976-996 AD) of the Fatimids, Egypt.

It should be underlined, that in a time when science ancestors of the West (Greek philosophy) is almost extinct, precisely the Islamic government managed to save through Damascus (Umayyad I) and Baghdad during the Abbasid period (*Bait al-Hikmah*), through translation efforts (Lughod, 1963: 59; Yoyo, 2017: 41). Developed through Cairo, *Dār al-Hikmah*, and it is transmitted back to the West via satellite city of Cordova with *Qasr al-Zahra*, *al-Madinah az-Zahiriah*, and others in Andalusia. During Hakam II, the scientific activities (madrasah education and universities) progressed so rapidly, making the city of Cordova known as the city of books. For example, during the Tenth Century in Andalusia 100% free of illiterate people, whereas in the neighboring country, a king of France is training signatures (Imamuddin, 1969: 172-181).

Madrasah that is very popular among Sunni Muslims is Nizamiya Madrasah in Baghdad that was built in 1065 and was completed in 1067 AD during the Prime Minister of Nizam al-Muluk. Two decades later the school became a university (Nizamiya University). This madrasah curriculum is different to the Islamic educational institutions mentioned above. In Nizamiyah the subjects taught only related to Islam, the general lessons are not taught at all (Nakosteen, 2003: 50; Nizar & Nizar, 2007: 168). Perhaps this is why the Indonesian Islamic education experts say that Nizamiyah as the first college in the history of Islam. While at the University of al-Azhar, curriculum was modified to the teaching of Shi'ism. Shortly, madrasah and universities in Andalusia produced many scholars who are experts in various disciplines, enlightening Europe, even the whole world on the era of the Golden Age of Islam (mainly in educational affairs).

Madrasah in Bangladesh

As already mentioned, that along with Muhammad ibn Qasim and other Muslims who ruled the Indian subcontinent, then many scholars, Sufis, and others as individuals spread Islam and lived in *khanqah*, a sort of *sufi* lodge. *Khanqah* is a manifestation of Islamic acculturation with indigenous culture. The process of acculturation can be divided into three phases: natural, education, and organization. In natural phases, the culture of Islam brought by traders and preachers of Islam individually, and some of them came simultaneously with the Muslim army to the subcontinent. Although its primary purpose is for trade, but the task of conveying religion can not be abandoned. The preacher, by command of the Prophet Muhammad, moves to convey the teachings of Islam, which is usually done in the evening as the leisure moments of trading time. Although preaching

activity conducted in natural and individual way, it proved successfully with many indigenous people who can accept and convert to Islam (Hamka, 1975: 674-690; M. A. Karim, Fahsin, & Maya, 2007: 145-155). Eventually, it is formed small groups under guidance of the preachers who continue naturally.

As a note, Islam formally developed in the Eastern part of India in general, and Bangladesh in particular and the surrounding areas, was under the initiation of Ikhtiar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiar Khalji, commanders of the Sultan Ghuri Muhammad, Ghuri Dynasty in Afghanistan who conquered the capital of Bengal, Nadia in the year of 1194 AD (Duff, 1899: 313-314). Meanwhile, the propagandists of Islam have Islamized the natives very long time ago. For example, Abu Yazid al-Bustami, is a famous sufi Muslim in the Indian subcontinent with the name, Bayazid Bustami (d. 872 AD), who established *khanqah* in north Chittagong, as the largest port city in Bangladesh (Zaman, 1980: 181-182), and until now the *Khanqah* with his tomb still exists. The author himself had come to the *Khanqah* of Bayazid Bustami in 1976 AD.²

It can be said that in the Ninth Century AD there was a place to learn or madrasah (*Khanqah*) in the region of Southeast Bangladesh as Islamic learning place for students who come from different regions. Later, to accommodate the students/*Satri* (*santri* in Indonesian term) then it is built traditional school or madrasah for the students and teachers, called *Khanqah*, which is famous as Pondok Pesantren (Boarding Islamic School) in Indonesia. Meanwhile, there is also a place to learn the religious teachings of Islam, but it is exclusive and there are not many, only in the residence of the *Buzurgh/Waliullah*. The public believes that the particular *buzurgh* has deep religious knowledge, especially science of *makrifat* and it is considered to have a direct relationship with God or a spiritual intermediary such as Hazrat Abdul Qader Jilani (Zaman, 1980: 180-184).

The traditional madrasah taught religious teachings by reading, memorizing, and remembering textually (M. A. Karim et al., 2007: 149-151). This continued until the arrival of colonists in Bengal in 1757 AD in which England beat Bengal ruler, Nawab (Sultan) Sirajuddaulah, and colonized the subcontinent until 1947 AD (Ali, 1973: 383-384; 721). In the last phase it is also formed organizations to coordinate the madrasah that grew and spread throughout all the region, this era can be termed as the era of education. The final phase, in order to regulate the traditional madrasah, and maintain the sustainability of Islamic propaganda and education, there is no other way except by a new cadre of some of the preachers. They are trained specifically, in Islamic theology, and the history of Muhammad's struggle as exemplary in Islamic propaganda (Nainar, 1956: 10-15). In this phase of organization that gave birth to the madrasah-based *khanqah* plus in South Asia which then converts into Aliah Madrasah around 1880 AD.

It has been called, that while the British ruled the Indian subcontinent, but Islamic education in madrassas is still running. At that time, English became the official language of the British Government that replaced the Persian language and Urdu as the language of Muslims in particular and the people of South Asia in general.

² The tomb (*makam*) probably fictitious. Actually before his death, he returned to his birthplace and was buried in Bustam, North Persia, today it is part of Azarbaizan.

The British government invites the people of South Asia, to learn English for practical reasons. Hindu immediately responded positively, they would instantly learn the language and occupied important positions in the British government. They soon reached it, because since the Eight Century, especially since the beginning of the Twelve Century until 1857 AD, Muslims are continuously in power. That is why it is a good opportunity for Hindu to fill the government posts. In the contrary, the Muslims affected by the fatwa of the Indian *Ulema* at that time, and it is similar in Indonesia, where the Acehnese *Ulema* issued a fatwa, *haram* (it is forbidden) for Muslims to learn the language of the *kafir* (infidels) and banned from working with the invaders.

On the other hand, the Muslims far left behind when compared to the Hindu community. This situation is quite long, then appeared some Muslim scholars, like Sir Sayed Ahmad Khan, Allama Shibli Nu'mani, Sayed Amir Ali, Allama Sir Muhammad Iqbal, and so on.

Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898 AD) who first hold the title "Sir" (among Muslim scholars in India) from the United Kingdom in London, invited the people of India, especially the Muslims to cooperate with the British government and learn the language. Because language is a tool of communication in order to achieve the progress of Muslim community. In 1870 AD Khan founded the College exclusively for Muslim students in Ghazipur, India, with the goal of advancing Islam through these educational institutions, by learning English, without reducing the essence of Islamic education itself. Later he established a formal school in May 1875, named *Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College* (MAOC) and it is recognized by the UK Government. The MAOC then developed to be a university in 1920 with the name "Aligar University" which is still admired by the world (Moudud, 1970: 276-277). At the end of the Nineteenth Century AD in addition to the religious lessons, it is also provided general subjects like English, and others. From these schools then stood *Madrasah-i-Aliyah* (Senior Islamic High School), as the first madrasah in Kolkata (Calcutta) (Moudud, 1970: 278).

For Madrasah Aliyah management,³ it was established Madrasah Education Board, in Kolkata, West Bengal (capital of the British Government at that time). After Britain gave independence to Pakistan and India in 1947 AD, the following year, both *Madrasah-i-Aliyah*, and Madrasah Education Board, Kolkata moved to Dhaka, East Pakistan at that time (although still existed in Kolkata till now). Subjects taught under the Madrasah Education Board in Kolkata (Calcutta), West Bengal, is as follows: Social Sciences, Science, Arabic, and Islamic Theology (*Hadith, Tafsir, and Fiqh*).

During the reigns of Pakistan (though standing in the name of Islam) it is not much significant progress in the management of Madrasah Aliyah curriculum. At that time there were two state madrasahs in the East Pakistan *Madrasah-i-Aliyah*, Dhaka and Sylhet. In addition, there is hundreds of Aliyah Madrasah managed by the private sector with the same curriculum thought in the state madrasah.

As mentioned earlier that, both in and outside the *khanqah*, madrasah was managed traditionally. There is also new classification of madrasah since initiated by Muslim figures

³ Before 1939 AD, there was Madrasah-i-Aliyah in Kolkata, under *West Bengal Madrasah Education Board* in 1927. However, its new curriculum has been legalized by the Board in 1939.

including Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Since the birth of Pakistan and the establishment of Bangladesh there are many kinds of *madrasah* that can be divided into three groups: State Madrasah, Private Madrasah with the same curriculum as the State Madrasah, and *Kaumi/Khariji* Madrasah. There are several levels of Madrasah (state or private Madrasah): 1) *Dakhil*, (six-years), 2) *Alim*, (two years), 3) *Fazil*, (two years), and 4) *Kamil* (two years) (“Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board- | বাংলাদেশ মাদ্রাসা শিক্ষা বোর্ড-,” n.d.).

Kaumi Madrasah or *Dars-e-Nizami* is a formal term but more popular for rural communities as *Khariji* Madrasah. It is seen as different model of educations mentioned above and it is managed by a purely private sector. Previously, the curriculum did not provide general subjects, but lately most of *Kaumi* Madrasah as it has been managed by the Bangladesh *Kaumi* Madrasah Board, the general/secular curriculum is introduced though the portion is relatively distant compared to the previous two types of madrasah.

The problems faced by the madrasah in general that its diploma is not recognized and the graduates are discriminated by the government. Alumni of madrasah can not work in government sectors. Hence the massive demonstrations approximately 300,000 students from various madrasah in East Pakistan gathered in Dhaka in 1965, demanding that madrasah diplomas should be recognized by the state. For example at *Fazil* level, they got the same subjects with Higher Secondary School (HSC), but it has not been recognized by the state. If they want to continue to the university, they must attend the HSC first before continuing to the university.

During the reigns of Bangladesh, there are many significant progress in the management of madrasah education both state and private. Since 1980s, many changes happened in the curriculum. *Dakhil* level, at first taken for 6 years to 8 years later, and for *Fazil* level from 2 years to 3 years. There are also a compulsory subjects in the *Dakhil* level as follows:

No	Subjects	Values
1	Qur’an Majid and Tajwid	100
2	Arabic I	100
3	Arabic II	100
4	Tauhid wa al-Fiqh	100
5	Bangla (Bengali)	100
6	English	100
7	Social Science	100
8	General Science	100
9	Mathematics	100
10	Agricultural Science/Home Economics	100
TOTAL		1000

Source: <http://www.bmeb.gov.bd>.

At the *Alim* level, there are special majors depending on the interests of students, there are *Alim* General, *Alim Murabbid*, *Alim* Science, and Business Studies *Alim*, which qualified with HSC General. While at the appropriate level of *Fazil* has led elective courses each with a Bachelor of Arts (BA) and graduate from *Kamil* level equated with the university diploma in general that is the degree of Master of Arts (MA).

Madrasah graduates both from state or private, have the same opportunity to work in all sectors of government in accordance with their respective fields. As already mentioned above, that all madrasah and public schools are managed by Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board whose position under the direct coordination of Ministry of Education Bangladesh. This, in contrast to the education system in Indonesia where there are two ministries that administer education: Ministry of Education and Ministry of Religion.

For the appointment of the employees / teachers / lecturers in Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board, it remains under the Ministry of Empowerment of State Apparatus. As for management of state examinations, supervision, accreditation, audit, and others are given full authority to the Chairman, Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board, Dhaka, Bakhshi Bazar.

In Bangladesh there are some Islamic University and hundreds of Aliah Madrasah (*Kamil*) and Senior Madrasah (*Fazil*) which produces undergraduate (BA) and master (MA) levels. Meanwhile, thousands of Senior (*Alim*) produced diploma of Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC) and Junior Madrasah (*Dakhil*) level generated diploma in equivalent to the Secondary School Certificate (SSC).

In addition to *Aliah* Madrasah, Madrasah Senior and Junior, there are also *Kaumi* Madrasah. *Kaumi* Madrasah was registered under *Kaumi* Bangladesh Madrasah Board which also offers general subjects in addition to religious subjects, and 100% of its management is submitted to the administrators of *Kaumi* Madrasah itself. There is also madrasah that is not bound at all by the state curriculum. Such madrasah is known as the *Dars-e-Nizami/Khareji Madrasah*. Some of these madrasah did not receive any financial support from the government. The madrasah is similar to traditional madrasah or *Pesantren* in Indonesia.

There is *Furqaniah* Madrasah which is located mostly in the mosque or outside the mosque. This kind of madrasah it is called as *Ibtidaiyah* (non formal Islamic elementary schools). The teachers and the *muazzin* of this mosque or madrasah are paid by the government. There are thousands *Hafezi* Madrasah (in East Pakistan about 6,000 over and now increased above 10,000 madrasah). This fast growth motivated by a saying from the Prophet Muhammad: "if in one family, there is a memorizer (*hafidz*) al-Qur'an, he will give intercession for the whole family, so they go to heaven." Although this hadith has no clear status (is it valid/weak), but the hadith seems to be very popular and triggers the motivation to memorize al-Qur'an.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the development of madrasah in Bangladesh is progressing very significant in terms of creating scholars who not only taking care of religious affairs but also general subjects in particular. More than that, the madrasah is expected to advance Islam and how to restore the proper function of madrasah as has been achieved in the Golden Age of Islam. At that time Islam succeeded in producing scholars in various fields who have contributed to the rise of enlightenment era of the Western world. In short, even there are weaknesses here and there, including the image that scholars or alumni produced by the Madrasah in Bangladesh still considered as inferior compared to the graduates of

Education Board of Bangladesh, but Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board has proved to play a significant role in advancing managerial system of the madrasah and made it more competitive. Therefore, the alumni of madrasah will have the same access such as those who graduated from the state educational system.

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