Historical Perspectives of Muslim Education

In the process of development and expansion, when a religion becomes complex, it needs the interpretation of its sacred texts and legal codes to be adjusted to the changing conditions. At this stage, society requires religious experts and well-versed scholars who can explain, interpret, and expound religious tenets to the people. The requirement to produce religious scholars is fulfilled by the religious schools known in the Christian world as seminaries and in the Muslim world as madaris (singular madrasa).

In the early period of Muslim history, there were no educational institutions in the Muslim world. The ulema (religious scholars) either used mosques or their residences as centres of learning where they gathered students around them and delivered their lessons. As books and writing material were rare, students were expected to memorize the lessons of their teachers. Lessons were written down on parchment or papyrus which was possessed only by the rulers and aristocrats. Teachers instructed students to memorize each and every word of a book so that if it was lost, he could reproduce it on the basis of his memory.

In 751 C.E, the Arabs came to know about the technique of paper manufacturing from the Chinese. In 793 C.E, the first paper manufacturing factory was set up in Baghdad. This was followed by the manufacture of paper in Morocco and Grenada in Muslim Spain, from where the art of making paper reached Europe. In the 13th century, the Turks brought it to India. The manufacturing of paper revolutionized education. Rare manuscripts which were inaccessible to scholars and students now became available. The calligraphists copied and supplied them to scholars. The manufacture of paper also facilitated administrative work and important events could also be recorded on paper.

In the early ninth century C.E, the Abbasid Caliph Haroon ur Rashid founded the Baitul Hikmat (House of Wisdom), which was further patronized by his successor Caliph al-Mamoon. It was an institute of higher learning in which famous scholars were appointed to undertake research work as well as translations from Greek and Indian philosophy. Among these scholars there were Christians, Jews, Indians and Muslims. Al-Mamoon also built an observatory for the scientists who were working there. The institute possessed an excellent library that consisted of rare manuscripts and books. In 1258, the institute was burnt down by Halagu Khan who invaded Baghdad. It was said that when the manuscripts were thrown in the river of Tigris, the water turned black because of the ink of the manuscripts.

The institution of madrasa was first introduced in Khurasan at the turn of the tenth century C.E. Subsequently, madaris were set up in every city of the Islamic world. The main emphasis of the madaris was on the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafa'i and Hanbali. The students of these schools frequently quarrelled with each other which affected the religious
atmosphere of the cities. Instead of producing religious scholars who could interpret religion to the common people, the seminaries became centres of communal movements. Among them, the Hanbalis were extremists who disturbed the social and musical gatherings in the city of Baghdad. According to historians, Baghdad and Nishapur suffered heavily as a result of these conflicts.

In 972 C.E, the Fatimid Caliphate founded the university of Al-Azhar in Cairo. Its objective was to train missionaries for the propagation of Ismaili teachings. To counter this move and defend the orthodoxy, Nizam-ul-Mulk Tusi, the prime minister belonging to the Saljuq dynasty established Madrasa Nizamia at Baghdad. Its first principal was the well known religious scholar, Imam Abu Hamid Ghazali, (d.1111 C.E) who was reputed to be rigid and orthodox.

There were two types of curriculums in these madaris. One was known as Maqool (logic, reason) which emphasized jurisprudence and logic. It produced qazis (judges), muftis (legal experts) and mohtasibs (ombudsmen) who became the state officials. The second type of curriculum was known as Manqool (tradition, transmission), which laid stress on learning the Holy Quran and traditions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Those who completed this education became imams (prayer leaders), khateebs (orators) or muezzins (those who give the call for prayer).

Generally, madaris were financially supported either by endowments or donations from the rulers and the nobility. In the time of the Mughals in India, it was a tradition to allot a small piece of land known as Madade Muaash (economic assistance) to the ulema. In this period, secular education in subjects such as architecture, medicine, engineering, carpentry and calligraphy was communicated through a system of apprenticeship with masters taking apprentices in their fields. In some cases these were family professions which were inherited from one generation to another.

In 1866, when the Deoband madrasa, Darul Uloon, was founded in India, its founders adopted modern educational practices such as annual examinations, awarding degrees and holding convocations. They also divided education into different departments. The most important department was Darul Ifta or Department of Jurisprudence. These responded to questions asked by the Muslim community on different social, political and economic issues. Later, the collection of these fatawa (religious opinions) was published in book form for public knowledge. The curriculum of the Deoband madrasa did not include philosophy or any subject relating to the social sciences. At the time of its foundation, it was suggested that the students should also be trained for different professions, such as carpentry, pottery making and weaving. This was opposed by the teachers as well as students, who regarded it below the dignity of a religious scholar to learn such crafts.

After the emergence of modern education which imparted secular knowledge, the madrasa became important as a centre of purely religious education. This divided the educational system and produced people with two different kinds of education. Today, the madrasa educated are perceived to be religiously orthodox and conservative while those with modern education are
considered as enlightened and progressive. In practical life, it has progressively become difficult for madrasa educated students to get respectable jobs leading to unemployment and frustration among them. There is a need to bring the madarises into the mainstream of education so that their students can receive modern and up-to-date education to become useful citizens of society.