

Arabic Learning among the Bengali Muslims of Assam: Trends and the Reality

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Abstract:

The people of Assam inhabit a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious society. Muslims are the integrated part of Assam. Among the Muslims of Assam, a huge number of people speak Bengali. From the historical point of view, it may be asserted that from 1228 A.D. to 1257 A.D., the king of Kamrupa was under the reign of the Bengal Sultans and from then on, Islam and the Islamic cultures were spread among the people of western Assam without any hindrance from the local authority. As regards the study of the Arabic language and literature among the Bengali people, it still remains in the Maktab, Madrassas and other educational institutions.

The advent of Muslim rule during the mediaeval period in India was the turning point of the history of this country. The immigrant Muslims brought with them a rich cultural heritage from Arabia and various other places of West Asia which influenced the economic, political and socio-cultural processes in India. Some Muslim rulers played a pivotal role in the development of education in this country. The fundamental role of education during those days was for the purification of the soul and for the preparation of life. Even though religious bias was prevented in the context of education, the Muslim scholars significantly contributed in various fields of learning, viz. science, medicine, art and philosophy.

The Bengali Muslims of Assam used to take the Arabic learning either from Old Scheme Religious Madrasa or New Scheme Religious Madrasa and College or Middle English (ME) Madrasa and High Madrasa or Middle English School and High School or Higher Secondary School or Junior College and Degree College and University. It is seen that the above-mentioned madrasahs, schools, colleges and universities are established to impart Arabic learning, but in reality, these madrasahs and schools are not imparting Arabic in a proper manner, as most of the schools and madrasahs have no teachers. The Government of Assam is ignoring its development. After the retirement of the existing teachers or moulvis, the government is not interested at all in appointing teachers where Arabic learning takes place. Day by day the numbers of the students are decreasing due to political involvement.

Keywords: Arabic Language; Assam; Madrasa Education; Arabic Learning

Introduction:

The People of Assam inhabit a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious society. Muslims are the integrated part of Assam. Among the Muslims of Assam a huge number of people speak Bengali. From

the historical point of view, it may assert that from 1228 A.D. to 1257 A.D. the king of Kamrupa was under the reign of the Bengal Sultans and from then Islam and the Islamic cultures were spread among the people of western Assam without any hindrance from the local authority. As regard the study of Arabic language and literature among the Bengali people is still remaining in the Maktab, Madrassas and other educational institution.

During the 18th Century, there were Maktab and Madrassa system of education in most of Bengali Muslim societies in Assam where young generations were given religious education properly in Arabic, Urdu and Persian. Therefore, the most of Bengali Muslim men and women were able to recite the Holy Quran in Arabic correctly.

By 1931 most of the waste lands of the Brahmaputra valley was already been occupied by them. After Sadullah became the premier of Assam for the second time in August 1942, it is alleged that the attempted a systematic settlement of Bengali Muslim peasant in Assam under the pretext of raising the state's agricultural production (grow more food campaign). In fact, this is believed to be a part of the design of some Muslim leaders to convert Assam into a Muslim dominated area.

Two third of the total Muslim population of Assam are Bengali origin and they used their own language 'Bengali' at home and Assamese in public place though Bengali Muslims living in the towns and cities, due to their assimilation with the Assamese, are so mixed together, that it is now difficult to differentiate between Bengali and Assamese. Their mother tongue is also becoming Assamese and they are commonly treated as Gorias. Thus, the number of Gorias is increasing day by day so on the basis of language spoken at home the total Muslims of Assam can be divided into two groups (a) Assamese Muslims and (b) Bengali Muslims and the number of Bengali Muslims is much more than Assamese Muslims.

Arabic Learning institution in Assam:

The advent of Muslim rule during the medieval period in India was the turning point of history of this country. The immigrant Muslims brought with them a rich cultural heritage from Arabia and various other places of West Asia which influenced the economic, political and socio-cultural processes in India. Some Muslim rulers played a pivotal role in the development of education in this country. The fundamental role of education during those days was for purification of soul and for preparation of life. Even though religious bias was present in the context of education, the Muslim scholars significantly contributed in various fields of learning, viz. science, medicine, art and philosophy.

Education during the medieval period was in the hand of private individuals, particularly under the learned Muslim theologians or Ulamas. Apart from the theologians, the managers of mosques and shrines ran Maktabas and Madrassas with the help of well to do Muslims of the locality. The state and the rulers were merely concerned with the grant of funds to conduct or to run those institutions. The grants were also irregular depending upon the interests and situations of the time. Besides, there were some scholars in different parts of the empire whose reputation also attracted pupils from all parts of the country. These scholars imparted education and maintained their own tradition of learning. They had no permanent source of income except the occasional grants from the rulers and the society. Education

during medieval period was an integral part of religion. On account of this there was a tradition to train scholars in the field of Islamic religion and law.

During medieval period Muslim education was imparted in the institutions of traditional learning, viz. Maktabas and Madrassas. Maktabas were the primary schools where fundamentals of religious education were imparted. There was no dearth of Maktabas and they were located where there was a considerable population. In Muslim society usually a child of four years was admitted to Maktab by performing a formal ceremony called *Bismillah Khani* through which he received the fundamentals of Islamic education. Some portions of Holy Quran were also taught in these institutions for the purpose of daily prayers and devotions. Generally, the mosque in charge or prayer leader (Imam) imparted education among the learners and they were called as 'Maulvis'. The medium of instruction was Arabic and the method of imparting education was by making the students memorize what was taught very rarely did the teacher give any explanation of the verses of holy Quran. As a matter of fact, it was not necessary on the part of student to comprehend what was taught. Even the teachers themselves were not conversant with the meaning of what they taught to their students.

Sultan Ikhtiyaruddin Malik Yuzbek erected a mosque in Kamrupa as early as 1256-57 A.D. as we have so far no information of any other mosques established in the country anterior to this date, we may accept this as the first mosque to have been erected in Assam. B.C. Allens account in the district Gazette Kamrup, makes out that there was a very ancient mosque in Puwa Makka Dargah of Hajo and that this mosque was rebuilt by Mir Lutfullah Shirazi, the Mughal faujdar, who governed the Kamrup region from 1653-1658 A.D. This ancient mosque at Hajo may be considered as the second mosque of Assam. Tradition relates that Ghiyasuddin Awliya constructed a mosque at Hajo during his stay there. This was probably the same mosque rebuilt by Mir Lutfullah Shirazi. In Rangamati, which lay to the north of Gauripur in Dhubri district, there is an ancient mosque which believed to have been constructed by sultan Hussain Shah Gauda, who held his sway over this part of Assam from 1502- 1519 A.D. In Mankachar area within this district there is another ancient mosque which is said to have been built by Mir Jumla, the Mughal general who was in Assam during the years 1661-1663 A.D. This mosque can still be seen in Mankachar. And the mosque was the first Islamic institution where the Islamic as well as Arabic education were given to the Muslim children which is traditionally run till today all over the country and the Imam and Muazzin are the teacher of that institutions. The grave of Mir Sayyid Ahmed Hussain Arzu is situated in Ambari of proper Guwahati; where in the second oldest mosque of Assam was constructed in 1637A.D. during the reign of Shah Jahan of Delhi, which is called *Budha Masjid*.

The Arabic word 'خان' stands for khanqah, which means a rest house where the travelers gather for religious talk (especially imparting Islamic education). In this connection, for the secondary education the students used to go to khanqahs which were also usually attached to the mosques like Maktabas. Higher education was imparted in Madrassas through the supervision of Ulamas and Imams. The Madrassas were small in number and located mostly at towns and cities. There was variability in course of instructions in Madrassa which led the students of Islamic learning from Madrassa to Madrassa and from place to place throughout the country.

When the foreign Muslim arrived in India they brought a rich cultural heritage with them. Many rulers built innumerable Madrassas in several parts of the Assam and granted funds for their maintenance for the cultivation of knowledge. They laid emphasis on the advancement of both theological and secular knowledge and for which distinguished scholars from various places were also invited. Of course religious bias was prevalent in the context of education during medieval India but despite this fact, secular subjects were also introduced in the curricula. The main subjects taught at Madrassas during that period were Tafsir (Exegesis), Hadith (Tradition), Fiqh (Jurisprudence), Kalam (Scholasticism), Tasawwuf (Mysticism), Tajrid (Art of Quranic Pronunciation) etc. Besides these, grammar, literature, logic, philosophy, arithmetic, geometry, algebra, astronomy and other sciences were also taught.

Since the early part of 20th Century, Arabic was largely introduced in most of the educational institutions of Assam, especially in the Arabic Educational Institutions which is called Khairia Madrasa and Senior Madrasa. In general, a large number of ME Madrassas and High Madrassas and also High Schools, Colleges and Universities where Arabic subject was introduced as a subject, so for the development of Arabic Studies so many kinds of Arabic Institutions were established in the state of Assam only in the north eastern region.

Arabic studies in this state may be classified into two sections. They are formal and non-formal education. Non-formal education comprises of mosque schools, private and non- public Madrassas where Arabic is taught for the sake of Islamic learning.

In addition to these religious institutions there are some other Madrassas viz. ME Madrassas and High Madrassas where Arabic and Islamic studies are given, more importance some of the ME Schools, High Schools, Higher Secondary Schools and Colleges, opened in the Muslim areas, are also paying heed to teaching Arabic. So, all these schools, Madrassas, colleges or universities, where there is provision for teaching Arabic, may be included in the 'Arabic Institutions'. In accordance with this conception, Arabic institutions may be classified as (a) Old Scheme Religious Madrasa (b) New Scheme Religious Madrasa and College (c) Middle English (ME) Madrasa and High Madrasa (d) Middle English School and High School and (e) Higher Secondary School or Junior College and (f) Degree College and University in general.

The reality:

The Bengali Muslims of Assam used to take the Arabic learning either from Old Scheme Religious Madrasa or New Scheme Religious Madrasa and College or Middle English (ME) Madrasa and High Madrasa or Middle English School and High School or Higher Secondary School or Junior College and or Degree College and University. It is seen that above mentioned Madrassas, schools, colleges and universities are established to impart Arabic learning but in reality these madrassas and schools are not imparting Arabic in proper manner as most of the schools and madrassas has no teachers. The Government of Assam is ignoring its development. After the retirement of the existing teachers or moulvis the government is not interested at all to appoint teachers where Arabic learning is taken place. Day by day the numbers of the students are decreasing due to political involvements.

In present day scenario, the Bengali guardians are denying Arabic learning for their children. Modern education, especially, engineering and medical studies are preferred by the guardians. As a result, Arabic learning is facing a severe obstruction among the Bengali Muslims.

Conclusion:

Muslim rule of undivided India brought Arabic language to eastern Indian provinces like Bengal, Assam as well as Bengali Muslims of Barak Valley or Surma Valley. As a result, many Arabic elements have crept into their mother tongue Bengali, their culture, customs, and rites and even to the vernacular literature and their day to day affairs because of their long and continuous co-existence.

The Arab navigators, travelers and Sufis who preached Islam to the different non-Muslim nations helped them come in contact with the local people. Thus, the Islam came to India including Bengal. Muslims had to learn Arabic for their religious purposes. Gradually, Arabic language influenced the Bengali Muslims and their language.

The Quran, being the foundation of Islam, has much influence on the Muslims of this region as in the rest of the world and the Quranic language being the language of the Islamic prayers, laws etc. has also influenced Muslim of every nook and corner of the world and their languages. Every Muslim whether Arab or non-Arab, has to learn Arabic from the very beginning of his education so that he may perform his prayer properly. Reading and recitation of the holy Quran is compulsory for each Muslim and hence the Quran has influenced the whole life of a Muslim in all part of the globe. The Bengali Muslims are never an exception to this. Arabic as being the language of the Arabs, it is also extremely rich and popular language. A large number of people in a significant part of the world speak in Arabic. In fact today, it has assumed the international status because of its wide application in trade and commerce and in cultural activities in the world. It is worth mentioning here that Arabic was the lingua franca during the middle ages and it became dormant for quite sometimes past but has revitalized itself and becomes more popular with the passage of time and has a singular status which very few classical languages command. Arabic language has left an impact on European languages; we find a vast number of English words of Arabic origin. Its alphabet has been adopted by Persian, Urdu, Sindhi, Turkish, etc.

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