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NEW AVENUES IN THE EDUCATION OF INDIAN MUSLIMS: CASE STUDY OF AN ISLAMIC SCHOOL IN INDIA

BY

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts (Muslim World Issues)

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ABSTRACT

This work carries out a case study of a new model of Islamic schooling located in the city of Bangalore, in South India. It examines the rise of this model that claims to bridge the gap between the formation of a strong religious identity and active contribution to the society. Drawing upon the dismal findings of the Sachar Committee about the educational condition of Indian Muslims, the study investigates the perception of religious identity and future plans of the current students of the school. Additionally, the study examines the life of a few graduates after school, and seeks to understand how the school helped shape their own identity upon contact with the wider world. It adopts a qualitative approach where participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions with the administration, students and alumni provide deep insights into the contribution of the school and the challenges facing it. The study concluded that, though in its infancy, the school has created strong affinity to faith in its students. Also, many of the alumni have excelled in various academic and professional fields. However, the school must address certain serious issues in order to be considered a viable alternative for successfully building up spiritually conscious, yet socially competitive graduates.

ملخص البحث

هذا العمل يتضمن دراسة حالة لنموذج جديد للتعليم الإسلامي في الهند. تقع المدرسة المختارة للدراسة في مدينة بنغالور بجنوب الهند. ويدرس هذا البحث صعود هذا النموذج الذي يتعهد أن يسد الهوة بين تكوين الشخصية الإسلامية القوية وبين المساهمة الحقيقية في المجتمع. وبالنظر إلى الحقائق المحزنة التي أوضحتها لجنة "ساشار" عن الوضع التعليمي للمسلمين الهنود؛ تركز الدراسة على فهم الهوية الدينية والخطط المستقبلية لطلاب المدرسة الحاليين. كما تناولت الدراسة حياة عدد قليل من الخريجين بعد التخرج من المدرسة، وإلى أي مدى ساعدتهم المدرسة في بناء هويتهم لمواجهة العالم الخارجي. وخضوعا للمنهجية العلمية فإن الدراسة سلكت المنهج النوعي، متمثلاً في ملاحظات المشاركين، والمقابلات المتعمقة، وأوضحت المناقشات الجماعية مع الادارة، والطلاب والخريجين رؤية عميقة عن مساهمة المدرسة والتحديات التي تواجهها. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أنه، وإن كانت المدرسة في مراحلها الأولية، إلاّ أنها قد خلقت في نفوس طلابها حبًا قويًا للدين. أضف إلى ذلك، أن عددًا كبيرًا من الخريجين قد برعوا في مختلف المجالات العلمية والمهنية. ومع ذلك، فإنّ على المدرسة معالجة بعض القضايا الخطيرة حتى تصبح بديلا عمليا لبناء الوعي الروحي في نفوس الطلاب، وفي الوقت نفسه يكونوا قادرين على المنافسة في المجتمع.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts (Muslim World Issues).

.....
Idris Salim El Hassan Salim
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts (Muslim World Issues).

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Examiner

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.....
Mahmood Zuhdi Ab. Majid
Dean, International Institute of
Islamic Thought and Civilization

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Anam Zaki

Signature …… Date ……..

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To my 3 mothers and fathers:

Nana, Nani: now with the Most Merciful.

Ammi, Abba: with you my imagination took flight.

Mom, Dad: who spent 4 years like 4 centuries, missing me.

"Then which of the blessings of your Lord will you deny?"

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii
Abstract in Arabic iii
Approval Page iv
Declaration Page v
Copyright Page vi
Dedication vii
Acknowledgments viii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1
1.0 Introduction to the Research 1
1.1 Research Problem 6
1.2 Research Objectives 6
1.3 Research Questions 7
1.4 Methodology 8
1.4.1 Library Research 8
1.4.2 Fieldwork 8
1.5 Time Frame 13
1.6 Limitation of Study 13
1.7 Literature Review 14
1.8 Conclusion 19

CHAPTER TWO: MUSLIM EDUCATION IN INDIA 20
2.0 Introduction 20
2.1 Mughal Period 21
2.2 The British Rule 26
2.2.1 Muslim response 28
2.2.2 Muslim Scholars and their Efforts 29
2.3 Post Independence 34
2.4 Current scenario 38
2.4.1 Current Schooling System in India 38
2.5 Muslim Institutions in India 40
2.5.1 Secular Institutions 40
2.5.2 Muslim-managed schools: Religious-cum-secular 43
2.6 Sachar Committee Report 44
2.6.1 Main Findings of Sachar Committee 45
2.6.1.1 Educational Conditions of Muslims 45
2.6.1.2 Economy and Employment 49
2.6.1.3 Poverty and Standards of Living 51
2.6.1.4 Conclusion 51
2.7 Conclusion 52

CHAPTER THREE: NEW AVENUES OF INDIAN MUSLIMS: THE CASE SITE 54
3.0 Introduction 54
3.1 New Avenues: Islamic Schools in India 54
3.2 Introduction to Site of Case Study 61
3.2.1 Selection 61
3.2.2 Introduction 63
3.2.3 Humble Beginnings 63
3.2.4 Establishment and Initial Years 64
3.2.5 Motivation, Vision and Mission 66
3.2.6 School Philosophy 67
3.3 Conclusion 68

CHAPTER FOUR: THE CASE SITE: ADMINISTRATION, CURRICULUM AND SPECIAL FEATURES 70
4.0 Introduction 70
4.1 Organisation of Administration 71
4.1.1 Financial Aspects 71
4.1.2 Protocol of Organisation 71
4.1.3 Other Posts 73
4.1.4 Academic Administration 75
4.1.4.1 Levels of Academic and Administrative Assessment 75
4.1.5 Religious/*Deeniyat* Administration 77
4.2 Curriculum 79
4.2.1 Secular Academic Curriculum 79
4.2.2 Religious/*Deeniyat* Curriculum 81
4.2.2.1 Development of *Deeniyat* Curriculum 83
4.3 Special Features 85
4.4 Conclusion 102

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH FINDINGS 104
5.0 Introduction 104
5.1 Students 104
5.1.1 Religious Identity 106
5.1.1.1 Varied Socio-Economic Backgrounds 107
5.1.1.2 Diverse Interests 107
5.1.1.3 Perception of Religion 108
5.1.1.4 Hijab- A Critical Marker of Identity 110
5.1.1.5 Awareness of the 'Other' 111
5.1.1.6 Interaction with Non-Muslims 111
5.1.1.7 Role Models 112
5.1.2 Future Plans 114
5.1.2.1 Gender Roles and Future Plans 114
5.1.2.2 Religion as a Goal 115
5.1.2.3 Professional Aspirations 116
5.1.2.4 Community Service 117
5.1.2.5 Challenges 117
5.1.2.6 Solutions 121

5.1.3 Conclusion 121
5.2 Alumni 122
5.2.1 Professional Achievement 123
5.2.2 The School in Retrospect 125
5.2.3 Transformative Character of the School 127
5.2.4 Agents of Change 128
5.2.5 Interaction with the 'Outside' World 129
5.2.6 Perception of Religious Identity: Past and Present 131
5.2.7 Challenges 133
5.2.8 The Future- Career and Contribution to Society 134
5.2.9 Conclusion 135

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION 138

BIBLIOGRAPHY 143

APPENDICES 151
Appendix: A 151
Appendix: B 153
Appendix: C 161

GLOSSARY 163

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure No.		Page No.
2.1	Literates as Proportion of Population by Age Groups – 2004-05	46
2.2	Children Currently Studying as Proportion of Population by Age Groups – 2004-05	46
2.3	Urdu Speaking Population and Enrolment in Urdu Medium Schools - 2004	48
2.4	Percentage Self Employed Workers in Each State by Socio-Religious Communities (SRCs) in Urban Areas (All Workers)	49
3.1	State-wise literacy levels - 2001	59
3.2	Top 100 Districts of Muslim Performance in 2001 Census	60
4.1	Protocol of Administrative Organisation of Wisdom International School	73

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

Battling hegemonic and colonialist ideas, the Muslim world has constantly faced the challenge of establishing educational institutions that remain true to the Islamic intellectual and spiritual heritage, while at the same time stay relevant in the modern world. Various models of institutions have been established in countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, the Indian sub-continent etc. with the aim of resolving this crisis of Muslim education.

Muslim education in India finds its roots as far back as 589 A.H. (1193 C.E.). It was strengthened through the consolidated Mughal rule from 963 A.H., and continues in various forms and models till this very day.[1] Many efforts have been made in India in recent times to align Muslim education with the need of modern times. However, its current status may be understood by the findings of Sachar Committee[2], which brought to light the miserable educational status of Muslims in India. The report conclusively stated that Muslims are amongst the most backward sections, in terms of education, in the country and are "at a double disadvantage with low levels of education combined with low quality education."[3]

After the establishment of British rule and subsequently, Western education, in India, Muslims of the sub-continent responded to this challenge of colonialist

[1] Rashid Al-Nadvi and Ghulam Mohiuddin, *Survey of Muslim Education: India*, (Cambridge: The Islamic Academy, 1985), 2.
[2] A study commissioned by the Indian Prime Minister to research the latest social, economic and educational conditions of the Muslim community of India in 2005.
[3] Prime Minister's High Level Committee, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India: A Report,* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2006), iii.

education in a number of ways – (a) Traditionalist response: the need to preserve and defend the traditional form of education laid the foundation of *madaaris* (pl. of *madrasah*) like *Deoband, Nadwatul 'Ulema* etc. (b) Modernist response like that of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan led to formation of institutions such as Anglo-Indian College with the main aim to ensure economic uplift and remove educational backwardness of Indian Muslims. (c) A third response was that of meek acceptance of the prevailing secularist system.

Ever since, Indian Muslims, particularly in the field of primary and secondary education, battle a dichotomy between the traditional (*madaaris*) and modern educational systems (standard public schools[4]) - the former limiting the mind, and the latter often sacrificing spiritual and intellectual culture of Islam at the altar of secular ideals. Especially after 9/11, various studies on *madaaris* and Muslim-governed schools have led to demands of 'modernization' of their outlook and curricula. However, try as they may, Muslims remain at the latter end of the social and economic ladder in India. Also, within the community itself, the sublime aims of Islamic education that lead to the 'the creation of the good and righteous man' are, up to now, far from being fulfilled.

In the current context, there are three avenues of school education available for Indian Muslims.[5] - (1) Government-run public schools: offering standard secular model of education with no Islamic education. The medium of instruction is predominantly English. (2) Muslim-managed recognized schools: offering standard secular school curriculum with or without added Islamic subjects. The medium of

[4] The term 'public school' in India refers to non-governmental independent schools, as per the English system. Many countries use the term 'public' to mean government-owned schools, and 'private' to mean independent schools. This is not the case in India, and the term should be understood in this context henceforth.

[5] Salamutullah, *Education of Muslims in Secular India*, (Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1994), 149.

instruction may be Urdu or English. (3) Muslim-managed unrecognized institutions: e.g. *Dini maktabs* and *madaaris,* offering traditional Islamic subjects with little or no secular education. The medium of instruction is predominantly Urdu or Arabic.

Which school a Muslim child is sent to, depends on various economic and social factors. Most of the affluent and educated Muslim parents send their child to secular public schools, the best of which are Christian-managed. While this class is a small minority among the Indian Muslims, they form an important section of the Muslim society due to their higher and most visible position they come to occupy in the country.[6] However, the products of such institutions often receive little or no religious instruction. So, while they get the best of 'education', their faith is often tested at the hands of a completely secular, or Missionary school.

On the other hand, religious and relatively poor Muslims consider the *madrasah* as the only safe ground for their own children. Preference of the Muslim masses for such institutions as against secular schools is demonstrated through ample statistical evidence.[7] Most of these institutions do not go beyond teaching *Qur'an*, *Hadith* and *Fiqh*. However, the call for *madrasah* reform in the recent age, and especially after 9/11, has led many of them to reconsider and include modern subjects in their curriculum.

Though there are many Muslim-governed Urdu-medium institutions, the non-availability of quality education in the Urdu language is seen by some as one of the reasons for the low educational status of Muslims in India. Sadly enough, Muslim-governed Urdu and English medium school graduates develop an essentially secular

[6] Al-Nadvi and Mohiuddin, 37.
[7] Salamatullah, 154.

personality.[8] Further on, those who benefit from higher education belong mostly to well-to-do families.[9]

While it is true that bulk of the Muslim population has been and will continue to utilize opportunities of education provided by the state, it is the demand of such state of affairs upon the Muslim Indian community to come up with alternative models of education for themselves where they safeguard their religious identity and, at the same time, find healthy means of interaction with the multi-religious society it lives in. At this junction, new and alternative models of educational institutions are being developed in the Indian Muslim society – one of them is a public school model which has attempted to inculcate all the positive features of 'modern education', while at the same time professes to be characteristically Islamic in nature and aims. It aims to meet the need of an alternate system of education, which provides Indian Muslims the platform to be competitive contributors to the society while, at the same time, maintaining their distinct religious identity.

These 'Islamic schools' founded by affluent Muslims, claiming quality infrastructure and sound financial backing, yet avowed commitment to raising children according to Islamic principles, are increasingly coming to the fore. In a secular country like India with strong patriotic undertones, these schools profess to provide a solution to the problem of school education of Muslims.

This research carries out a case study of such an Islamic school in the city of Bangalore, South India. The school aims to remove the gap between Muslim religious education and contribution to the society – a point of major contention within the

[8] Israr Ahmad, "Towards Understanding Islamic Paradigm of Education," Paper presented at the seminar on Islamic Paradigm of Education with special reference to Quranic & Sunnatic Science, Dhaka, Bangladesh, <http://i-epistemology.net/education/348-towards-understanding-islamic-paradigm-of-education.html> (accessed 20 March, 2013)
[9] Salamatullah, 168.

Indian Muslim community and the Indian Government, at large. Chapter 2 of this research delves into the history of Muslim education in India, leading up to the current system of schooling and types of institutions existing in the contemporary Muslim world today. This shall enable us to understand the current scenario and the rise of these 'Islamic schools' in its proper context. It, then, ends with a discussion of the Sachar Committee Report, outlining the exact findings of the Report in the field of education. Chapter 3 discusses the rise of 'Islamic school's as new avenues for Muslim education in India, in general, and in South India, in particular. While looking at some of the characteristics of this model of schooling, the chapter briefly introduces the school under study, its inception, and vision and mission. Chapter 4 details the school's organization of administration and its curriculum in a brief manner – both secular and religious. It also highlights the special features of the school that informs its Islamic character: teacher training, special activities and facilities. Chapter 5 describes the some emerging trends and findings of the interviews and discussions held with (a) the students of Grade 10^{th} and 12^{th} in order to understand their perception of their religious identity and future prospects and plans of/or contribution to the society at large. Secondly, it describes the findings of the interviews and discussions with the school's graduated alumni to see their perception of their Islamic identity after leaving school, to assess where they stand, and understand how much the school has contributed in making them fruitful members of society in the long run. Chapter 6 outlines the conclusions of the researcher and lists recommendation and suggestions for further research in this area.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

While many researches have been conducted on *madaaris* and few on Muslim public schools, the growth of these 'Islamic' schools is an interesting phenomenon, which must be studied. Are these schools the solution to the problem? What is apparent is the advantage they have over the first two, in that, contribution to society and individual success is not considered a natural sacrifice in order to be a good Muslim, and vice-versa. They are an alternative to both traditional *madaaris* as well as to "secular" schools, private as well as public.[10]

To arrive at specific conclusions, more in-depth study has to be made. This research, thus, studies one such school model in South India, and attempts to assess its claim to developing holistic Islamic personality of graduates who are able to compete with other secular-school graduates, while remaining firmly bound to principles of Islam.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

It is hoped that the study would be the beginning of a significant assessment of new avenues of Muslim education in India and help unveil few important contributions that these schools are making, being viable alternatives for Muslim parents to secular and mostly Christian-managed Indian schools. More specifically, the study aims to –

1) Outline aims and objectives of the Islamic School.
2) Describe the main features of its infrastructure and curriculum.
3) Highlight major differences between this model vis-à-vis *madaaris* and other Muslim-governed public schools.

[10] Yoginder Sikand, "Bridging Deen and Duniya: The "Modernisation" of Islamic Education in India," Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, vol. 29, no. 2 (2009): 237. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602000902943690>

4) Evaluate the success of this model with regards to building up of Islamic-personality, yet socially competitive products.
5) Determine to what extent this model has been successful, or otherwise, in bridging the gap between the two ends (traditional and modern) of Muslim education in India.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following research questions –

1) Who are the founders of the school and with what aim and objectives did they establish it?
2) What are the main features of its administration, infrastructure and curriculum?
3) How does the school differentiate itself from religious *madaaris* and other Muslim-governed public schools?
4) (i) As per the Grade 12 students –
    a. What is their Islamic outlook?
    b. What do they aim to do in the future?

    (ii) As per the alumni of the school –
    a. What fields are they pursuing after finishing school? What are their future prospects?
    b. What is their outlook on their Islamic identity?
5) What are the apparent strengths and weaknesses of this model?
6) How does this model contribute to bridging the gap between education of Muslims and their contribution to the society?

1.5 METHODOLOGY

The research employed the following ways of gathering data and information –

1.5.1 Library Research

Libraries in IIUM were accessed to obtain books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, governmental reports and archival material available on the concept of Islamic education; education of Muslims in general and in India in particular; and established Muslim primary and secondary school institutions, with special reference to South India.

While the researcher accessed a few libraries in India as well, IIUM library and the Internet proved to be a major source of information. The researcher faced difficulty in gaining access to some universities' libraries in India due to restrictions of visitors. Also, it was not feasible to travel to North India, since the study was being conducted in South India. Some valuable books were also recommended by some educationists with whom the researcher had the chance of meeting during the course of the study.

1.5.2 Fieldwork

Fieldwork is the backbone of this research. The researcher travelled to the city of Bangalore in South India in December 2012. After a period of few weeks, the researcher was able to finalize the school to be studied and visited the site selected as case study. The administration of the school was very helpful and accommodated the researcher's request for interviews and discussions. However, as the Annual Sports Day of the school coincided with the initial meeting, the researcher had to delay the planned interviews and discussions for a week.

The school nominated one high school teacher to assist in scheduling interviews and observations. The work was challenging since this is the researcher's first foray into fieldwork. Overall, the experience was enlightening and it gave the researcher a very good opportunity to witness the activities and organisation of the school first hand. The study was conducted over a period of eight weeks. The following methods of data collection were employed –

1) **Participant Observation** –

   The researcher observed certain classes of Grade 10^{th} & 12^{th} in order to understand and very briefly describe the method of instruction, student participation and teacher-pupil relationship. Observations were recorded manually and via an audio recorder. The researcher also observed the morning assembly, and annual Sports Day of the school to understand the school's activities and initiatives. Moreover, the researcher was also given the opportunity to visit all five branches of the school in different parts of the city.

   The researcher maintained a personal diary of field notes to record any personal observations or thoughts. Sometimes, anything that the researcher wanted to find out later or make a special point of was also jotted down. These observations enriched the experience of the researcher and granted more insight into the research topic.

2) **Focus Group Discussions and Interviews -**

   Detailed Focus Group Discussions and semi-structured in-depth Interviews were carried out with the administration, the students as well as the alumni. The main goal in interviewing the administration was to understand the aims and objectives of the establishment of the school, the

policies kept in place to ensure Islamic and intellectual growth of the students, and evaluate its practices and curriculum. Focus group discussions with the students and alumni sought to examine the mindset of the students, evaluate the impact of education on them and to define how this model of education has shaped their perceptions of their faith and future prospects.

All the discussions and interviews took place in the premises of the school. The administration and teachers were interviewed in the school offices and staff rooms. The students were involved in focus group discussions that took place in classrooms allocated by the school for this purpose. Since most of the alumni were out of reach, only few of them could be interviewed face-to-face; rest of them were interviewed via phone and the conversations were audio recorded. All interviews and focus group discussions lasted from 40-60 minutes.

The following categories were included in Focus groups and in-depth Interviews (see Appendix C for a complete key of interviews) –

i) Founder-Principal of the school: the in-depth interview was conducted in the Founder-Principal's office. This was a very crucial, yet difficult interview to conduct because of the interviewee's busy schedule. After many cancellations and re-scheduling, the interview was finally conducted over a period of two hours.

ii) Members of administration and academic staff: a total of four administrators (three female and one male staff) and five subject teachers were interviewed at length, in addition to informal conversations and observation of many others.

iii) Students of Grade 10th: a total of forty students participated in the focus groups. Since the school is strictly gender-segregated, separate discussions had to be carried out with the male and female students. In each case, 50% of the class strength was included. Twenty girls and twenty boys were involved in two separate focus group discussions. The class teachers handpicked the students. The discussions mostly tended to start slowly, with the students hesitating to open up. However, after a brief round of introduction and warm-up, the students opened up considerably and discussed their opinions candidly. The female students were noticed to be more forth coming and willing to discuss issues as compared to the male students. Interestingly, after the researcher had finished the discussion, many girls not included in the discussion expressed their desire to be interviewed as well! However, the researcher was time-bound and could not do so.

iv) Students of Grade 12th: the school operates Grade 12th only for female students. The researcher held focus group discussions with eight female students (100% class strength) of the grade.

v) School Captains: Ten female and ten male student leader representatives were involved in two separate focus group discussions. The groups included the Head School Captains, Vice-Captains, Sports Captains and house representatives.

vi) Selected alumni: Since the school does not maintain any official records of the alumni, it was quite difficult for the researcher to track them down. Requests were made to the administration, teachers and even students to provide details of any or all alumni they remembered or were in touch

with. After a lengthy period, the researcher managed to gather information about 10 female alumni and 10 male alumni. Out of this number, 5 female and 5 male alumni were interviewed. Apart from 3 female alumni, who agreed to be interviewed face-to-face, all other interviews took place over the phone and were audio-recorded.

vii) Some parents/guardians of students of the school: Since the researcher was quite pressed on time, extensive interviews with parents were not carried out. Rather, the researcher relied on informal conversations with some parents and guardians.

viii) Few authorities in the field of Indian Muslim education: After extensive research to find a suitable school for case study, the researcher came in touch with many Indian Muslim authorities and educationists. Three of them have established their own Islamic schools. Their insights and comments were valuable as they help the researcher to gain deeper insight into the challenges of running such institutions, instead of relying on only the administrators at the site of case study.

3) Documentation –

The researcher also contacted the school for formal documents and policies, written reports, memoranda, progress reports or any other internal documentation that could be made available for the research. The school informed the researcher that it does not have formal official documents about its mission and vision. However, the researcher got access to the school diary, which provided important information about the school uniform, events, school song and other rules. Also, the researcher