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History at the madrasas

NITA KUMAR



HISTORY in Madrasa Jamia Irfaniya*: It is class 8, a class of some 40 young men. They are sitting on benches and not on *daris*, only about four in the stereotypical caps, all looking smart and modern. And they are open. On my arrival, they get over their smiling and staring quickly and then ignore me and get on with their work.

The teacher gives them a brilliant lecture on the topic of the day, ‘The Expansion of British Rule in India’, sub topic, ‘Control by the English over Bengal’. A familiar narrative falls on my ears. Alivardi Khan... Companies... Calcutta... Chandernagore... fortifications... Mir Jafar... Treaty of Murshidabad... Battle of Plassey. The children are listening enraptured. Naturally. He is telling it like a story, like ‘literature’, even as he is peppering the blackboard at odd angles with scribbled names and dates.

We come to the Treaty of Allahabad, and the signing over of the *lagaan* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. At this point he alludes to the movie Lagaan. It is an appropriate reference, in that it is one all the children, maybe the whole nation would get. It is good technique. As an old-timer at developing techniques for teaching history, I only wish the young teacher had not been so unsure about his reference to a popular film, had not lowered his voice and implied, ‘This is a mere aside, you understand; not part of my otherwise very serious history lesson.’

This excepted, I have no differences with him. He is spinning the same grand narrative of modern India that is familiar to me and thousands of others from school, college, university and our own work. He is a knowledgeable historian and consults no notes. He is a fluent speaker and is narrating at the level of the children. If I was a student in the class, I would respect him involuntarily for being a strong authority figure, and for opening up so effortlessly a window into this exciting world of adventures for me.

But there is one grave flaw in his narrative, which he shares with all other teachers of history. He does not manage to communicate in any way, ‘This place was called Bengal, but was an incipient India. It is *you*, *your* story. Alivardi Khan dressed like us, spoke like us. He was different because he was a nawab and had his own calculations. Should we discuss the priorities of a nawab?’ What is not taught effectively in Jamia Irfaniya is not taught in any school in India: that a nation can have immense convolutions and still emerge, injured and imperfect (as a kind of miracle) *a nation*, which means (still more miraculously) that you and I and everyone else who lived here past and present *are one*. That we want to believe it and make it true. Let us jointly exercise our imaginations to see what this idea could mean (and what it leaves out).

But the students, as I said, are enraptured. Given the narrative as it stands, the teacher is a talented performer. The class is successful. If there is a shortcoming in the teaching of history in madrasas like Irfaniya, it is a shortcoming shared by all the schools of the country.

This particular teacher, Mr. Saiyad for convenience, also gives the explanation for this ‘shortcoming’. The course to be covered in class 6, 7, 8 is huge: the whole of ancient India (including prehistory and early man), medieval India and modern India, respectively, with a large dose of civics in each textbook as well. Nothing is left out. The narrative is more condensed than one would find at higher levels but is the same compilation of facts. As Mr. Saiyad puts it, ‘If you teach properly, you cannot just mention an event, as the textbook does. You have to explain it. You have to use five sentences instead of one. Then they need to write everything. For them, nothing will be learnt if they do not write. So, how to use the half hour period three times a week (the other three go to geography)? Lecture? Have them read? Have them write? Correct? Discuss?’

It sounds impractical to me to suggest map-work, classroom activity, or innovative methods after this. In any case, no such methods have achieved legitimacy yet in Indian schools. There are many problematizations of the writing of history by sophisticated historians. They have no time for, and there is no discussion by others of, alternative classroom techniques to the present grand narrative delivered as boxed knowledge to empty receptacles. Comparing this technique at its best, as at Irfaniya, and postmodern history at its best, the moral I see is: A straight narrative is more interesting for children than an ironic, reflexive, open-ended one not at their level.

The nature of Jamia Irfaniya: All this comprises ‘history at the madrasas’, but, as the four white caps remind us, we must ask: what makes this specifically a madrasa? Irfaniya is a modern building of three storeys, the rooms built on three sides around a courtyard, a wall on the fourth. They own a whole *katra* with some twenty shops. Their classrooms are large and all open onto the central courtyard through verandahs and balconies, as well as have windows on the opposite side, so are well lighted and airy. Let us go to an Arabic lesson in class 1.

There are about 20 boys and 10 girls, all small and sweet. They wear an assortment of clothes although some students’ appearance tells us that the uniform is supposed to be white.

The little children could look like an illustration in the entry ‘Education’ of the Dictionary of Islam by Thomas Patrick Hughes published in 1885 (repub. Rupa, 1988). Children sit on a jute mat on the floor and recite loudly to themselves. When bored by reciting, they talk among themselves. The teacher says, ‘*Aiye! Sabak sikho!* (Hey you! Learn your lessons!’) And the boys I am looking at suddenly seem to fall over, sideways. No, they are beginning the recitation of their lessons. They sway and learn some five lines each every day. During the reciting they look away into the distance with glazed eyes.

The maulvi can call them names, hit them or threaten them with a cane, and make them stand up in awkward positions. He summons them one by one and hears the lines they have learnt and ‘gives’ them the next three or four lines to learn up. They use the terms ‘read’, ‘learn’ and ‘recite’, but all the children are doing is deciphering the Arabic alphabet to read the Quran line by line, with no understanding of any word of its content. Separately, they learn at an elementary level what the duties of a Muslim are, in subjects called by the equivalent of ‘Dini Talim’, or, religious education.

The children could look like a benign illustration, but our modern pedagogic sensitivities, or mine at least, would question the validity of such rote learning and abuse. I would consider it ‘pain’ at two levels: at the daily level of how children are treated, and at the long-term level of their being denied choices in their future.

But this is a different problem to that of history teaching. The primary schooling in madrasas like Irfaniya, up to class 5, is in Urdu medium. They are moved in to Hindi medium in class 6, 7 and 8, then go to high

school elsewhere. They have a platter full of languages: Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, English. They are learning in the basic *shiksha* pattern and use all the basic shiksha textbooks for all the subjects. Two extra languages and their initial religious education aside, children who study in Jamia Irfaniya are like children in other institutions. The history they learn is shared by all children. Insofar as this history is inadequately conceptualised and taught, all children, including those in the madrasa, are ill-fitted to be part of India. The failure is one of historians who write textbooks, administrators who design them and teachers who work out pedagogic strategies.

Madrasas: In the archival records of the British colonial state, as well as in the private records of members of the Indian intelligentsia, the indigenous school of North India is referred to by the generic term ‘madrasa’. There is no exclusive implication of this institution as Islamic. This is close to the literal meaning of ‘madrasa’ which is ‘the place of *dars*’: *dars* being teaching, instruction, a lesson, or lecture.

Today, the term ‘madrasa’ stands for Islam. It does so, moreover, not in a neutral sense in which ‘masjid’ still means place of congregation, but rather in a heavily loaded sense of a place of *biased* and *distorted* learning. It is regarded, loosely, as a hotbed of terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and in India, of opposition to modernity and progress, by which is consensually implied both western modernity and progress as well as indigenous versions of the same. ‘Close down the madrasas,’ demands the popular press as part of its analysis of Islamic resurgence. ‘These institutions, funded by external sources’ is their description by a certain kind of layperson, meaning, ‘anti-national external sources.’ Madrasas are treated as the index of backwardness even by secular Muslim intellectuals. The curriculum is not supposed to have changed from about the 13th century to the present.

In order to understand the nature of history teaching in contemporary madrasas in India more fully, we have to agree on the following: (i) Muslims are also heterogeneous, with sects, schools, ideologies, classes, gender divisions, subcultures and territorial and linguistic identities. One has to balance between generalization which reveals patterns, and contextualizing which is necessary for precision. (ii) There always exist several approaches to history, as written, taught and passed on. To judge any of them as right, wrong, correct, or false, we must specify *for whom* and *according to which criteria*. (iii) Muslims are not otherwise nice people who have somehow gone wrong on certain points. They

must cease to be understood as *in opposition* to something normative and better. They are just themselves. Yes, to be ‘oneself’ is to have an oppositional identity, insofar as most identities, at all time, are articulated in opposition to an ‘other’.

The heterogeneity of madrasas: When students finish with class 8 in the madrasa described above, they go to other high schools in the city and continue in the same stream as in their middle school. I would call this a secular, nationalist stream, in intention, with failures in both the secularism and nationalism. Perhaps the biggest aspect of failure is that this education is relatively meaningless in their lives and some 90% of them drop out after class 8. Almost none of the students go on to Irfāniya’s own higher classes. The equivalent of high school, intermediate and BA., are the munshi, mauvi, alim and fāzil degrees awarded at two year intervals. These classes are housed in a separate building, also called Madrasa Irfāniya, under the administration of the same committee, with a different principal and headmaster. This Madrasa Irfāniya is under the Arabic and Persian Madrasa Board of U.P. (and in the respective state, in each case). Such Boards run the four exams mentioned above, as well as others such as Qamil and Mumtaz-ul-Muhadassin.

Madrasas belong to a certain sect each, such as Barelwi, Deobandi, or Ahl-e-hadis. For some, including among the madrasa administrators, the differences between the sects is of utmost importance; for others it is trivial merging on inconsequential. Anyone who walks around to observe classes in, say, Madrasa Hamidia, Madrasa Dar-ul-Islam, or Madrasa Umahut-ul-uloom, each of a different sect, cannot distinguish how the sectarian differences play themselves out.

When asking about the textbooks, one learns from some teachers that there is a difference between Barelwi and Deobandi books, and from others that there is not; and typically that the differences are minor ritualistic ones regarding how to pray and whom to address. Reading the textbooks does not explicate the differences either. There are good, better and worse textbooks, independent of affiliation. They are written by diverse people, and published differently, with Deobandi ones written and published from Deoband (but also from Nadwa). Much as one would like a clear pattern to emerge that would match sectarian loyalties,

it does not.

In history teaching, particularly, there is little chance of pinning down a Bareilwi version of history as distinct from a Deobandi one. While there certainly exist claimants to a significant difference, the educators I personally have met are mostly of the opinion that the differences are greatly exaggerated and that the colonial state particularly distorted the relationship between them by exaggerating differences.

The most startling difference is not between the sects, which certainly do have separate institutions and constituencies. It is between the madrasa which is affiliated with the state board or the Basic Shiksha Parishad, and is secular and nationalist (plus teaching the Quran on its own and using Urdu as a medium at lower levels), and the madrasa which is affiliated with the madrasa board, and is explicitly religious. When marking this difference, we must also remember that for every hundred students educated in the latter religious system, some one thousand are educated in the secular, nationalist system. This may seem to mark the victory of the nationalist over the religious sectarian, but if there are certain rewards that come for students from such a victory, they are small and elusive.

Before discussing this further, there is another important difference to be noted within the catch-all term ‘madrasa’. Many children being educated are taught only at home. Either in their own home or in another’s, children ranging from three to twenty gather to learn the Quran from a maulana or maulani, simply someone who has in turn read the Quran. Again, these children are never explained, and never understand, a single word of what they are reading. The *tarjuma*, or translation, of what they are reading, can be pursued, according to their educators, when they grow up – if they wish.

What history do these young students in domestic madrasas know? I tried to answer this with a group of a dozen girls ranging from six to sixteen, from beginners to those who had already read half the holy book. What we would consider historical facts were unknown to them. They did not know who Babar was or what he had done. They did not know when India became independent (and if it had). Certainly, there is a gender difference too. Females are a notch more ignorant than males of modern narratives and facts, and no doubt more knowledgeable of histories of the family and community. But, as my previous research revealed, boys are ignorant also, even those who are in the primary

sections of madrasas, and in such startling ways that the notch they are higher becomes invisible.

There are other children who do not study at all, neither at home nor outside, neither the Quran nor secular subjects. They begin working early, and are among some of the most ‘cultured’ people otherwise. They go towards forming, however, the vast pool of India’s illiterates. I mention them here in the understanding that a question about madrasas is really a question about Muslims, and the absence of madrasa education among Muslims is also a statement about madrasas.

To end, the heterogeneous nature of madrasa teaching is a product of class, sect and history. The upper classes and socially mobile Muslims will ensure that their children receive the best cosmopolitan kind of teaching beyond madrasas. Provincial Muslims of almost all classes will choose from among a range of madrasas, or of Muslim schools with no ‘madrasa’ in their name but with the same combination of national curriculum, Urdu and religious education. Poorer Muslims may be satisfied with no other teaching but the Quran at home. A very small number of the two classes above may send their boys for the religious education necessary for a professional religious career. The very poorest may dispense even with Quran learning at home, but would certainly ensure that their children learn their vocation.

The heterogeneity of history: There are two kinds of nationalist history. There could perhaps be a ‘good’ Indian nationalist history, but it does not exist yet. It does not exist anywhere, and it does not exist in the madrasas. The best that exists, as I see it, is articulated in a textbook like *Hamara Itihas aur Nagarik Jiwan* (Basic Shiksha Parishad, U.P., 2002). It could be taught excellently too, if used as a guide, and followed in principle and not in letter. A good teacher like Mr Saiyad dislikes this textbook because he does not find in it enough of a clear and strong narrative, and finds it too much like ‘literature’. He does a wonderful job of teaching it anyway because he in turn makes history ‘literature’.

Apart from the general problem that a nationalist history is a distorted and artificial one if not cross questioned and related to actual people’s lives, this history has specific problems. Aurangzeb is always vilified,

Akbar celebrated, heroes like Rana Pratap or Shivaji treated like saviours or martyrs, rather than as complex personalities. The long-term damage of such distortions is immeasurable. Children grow up into adults thirsting for some kind of revenge because they actually believe that ‘In 3000 years of our history people from all over the world have come and invaded us, captured our lands, conquered our minds... all of them came and looted us, took over what was ours...’¹

The second kind of nationalist history is a very weak version, where the teachers are unenergetic and unsuccessful in communicating any sense of a nation, including the elementary facts. All the teachers, including the good ones like Mr Saiyad, consider this failure to be a function of the ‘backwardness’ of their students’ families. Families should not be so ignorant, so uninterested in education, should somehow magically not be illiterate and pre-modern themselves. The subtext here is that parents should be able to help their children with homework and do their share of the teaching as it is supposed to be divided between home and school.

There are two kinds of non-nationalist histories. The first is that taught in munshi, maulvi, alim and fazil sections. This is *Tarikh-e-Islam*, or *The History of Islam*, such as written by Sheikh Moinuddin Nadavi, published by Darul Musannafin, Azamgarh. Importantly, it is abridged by Asir Adravi from its original four parts to four thin booklets of some seventy pages each. These are the ‘notes’ that students actually memorize for their exams. It is consensually agreed that teachers do not need to explicitly teach or explain this history. It is there in the notes, and students can ‘manage’ on their own.

There are several versions of this history as written and published. In a Shia version, the position of Hazrat Ali will be different to that in a Sunni version. In Sunni sectarian versions there may be barely distinguishable differences, although an institution might prefer to teach its own publication. One version which is never taught in madrasas is the western version of the ‘Venture of Islam’, or even the histories of Islam written (in English) by western educated Indian or Asian scholars. These are taught in the Arabic history courses of Indian universities, but not in madrasas. One may question whether the ‘History of Islam’ as taught in board madrasas follows the norms of disciplinary history.

Like other textbooks, it sounds biased in little ways. Its biggest bias is to speak, not ‘objectively’, but as a concerned insider, thus: ‘Before the

coming of Islam, there was no worship of the Supreme God anywhere.’ Another bias could be that it is one-sided. This history concentrates on Arabia and does not mention India at all. In justification of this and their total course, board madrasas maintain a career orientation logic. Their students are trained to preach and to teach, and all others can and do study in other types of schools and madrasas.

The second type of non-nationalist history is the local history not explicitly taught anywhere but known and cherished by children as they grow into adults in lieu of the teaching of other kinds of history. We should take this history seriously, for two separate reasons. If we were worried about a threat *to* nationalist history, we should know that it came from both a sectarian history such as the History of Islam, *and* from a local history that flourishes in the absence of deliberate nationalist teaching. If we were worried about a threat *from* nationalist history, we should also know that one of the ways to fashion a more humane, imaginative and correct history in the future would be to take seriously these local histories at present confined to the ‘illiterate’.

The oppositionality of madrasas: There is an immense variety of positions from within those who grapple with the question of the appropriate education for Muslims. We can barely touch on a few. The question, according to Dr Muqtada Hasan Mohammad Yasin Azhari, the Rector of Jamia Salfia, is not one of East versus West or Islam versus the West, but of what is practical and desirable. Those structures which are practical and useful are taken over by Muslims regardless of whether they originate in the West or not, such as written exams. Muslims open the institutions needed by them.

Thus, for Salfia, it was necessary to have ‘an educational institution where together with a high-level study of Quran and hadis, there would be higher study of Arabic language and literature, and there would be also the work of writing and publishing books, where books of hadis would be written and distributed...’ (*Tarjuman*, Delhi, 1 January 1964, p. 10, quoted in *Jamia Salfia Markazi Darul Ulum ka Sankshipt Parichay*, Varanasi: Salfia, 1998, p. 30.)

This is a fair description of the identity of a Madrasa Board madrasa. It

is criticised by many educated people such as Masooda Khan, the Principal of Umahut-ul-uloom, who is against religious education. She considered other cities more forward than the provincial one she lives in, with its preponderance of 'traditional' cottage industry. Although not said by her openly, I understand that she is a pathan, or an ashraf of some kind and she considers weavers who do not value modern education backward. She is vehement in denouncing those who behave like frogs in a well, who provide services only to train maulvis, and who make religion the staple and be-all of their lives.

On my part I would like to separate the Arabic madrasas as specialised vocational institutions comparable to other narrow training institutions. Then I would propose we understand the bulk of madrasas in the larger context of schooling in India and modernity in India. In this perspective, I see schools in India as covering some five parts of a range of schools, each fading into the other. At one extreme, the institution with the weakest link to modernity is the municipal or mahapalika school. It has all the paraphernalia of a modern school except the teaching. It also has a colonial attitude in its core distinction between us, the enlightened, and them, the ignorant. Next to it comes the local 'English medium' school, which has all the same structural features such as age-graded classes, as well as furniture for children and the requirement of uniforms. Neither the students nor their guardians, nor the teachers nor the administrators, fathom the meaning behind the modernist features they live out, but compared to the first kind of school they live more of them out and more strictly so.

Next in the range comes the madrasa. Yes, it is indeed more modern than the mahapalika and the neighbourhood convent school. On the face of it it is nothing but traditional. In the lower classes boys all wear caps, girls all cover their heads. All learn the Quran. But their buildings are cleaner and more solid, the classrooms better laid out, the books less in tatters, students and teachers more in harmony. The rote learning of the Quran with swaying of the upper body and recitation at an undecodable speed finishes off in the first years. Then there is the execution of the modern requirements of the writing of questions and answers, the preparation for exams and revision, and the grappling with several subjects in an age-graded way.

And, just to complete the argument, the next two phases are the imitation convent schools, and then the actual missionary and public schools. The history taught here is the same as in the others. Only its facts are better

memorised by students and they are taught how to be more adept at spinning out narratives. The best cases aside, one could argue that these schools, for all their liberalism, are more violent towards the child than the madrasa and more successful in transforming his being according to external ideological formulations.

A madrasa can be of many kinds; its history teaching of many kinds. When it is Islamic, it is geared to a profession. When it is secular, it is nationalist in the way prescribed by various Boards and common to all schools. This history is inadequately taught almost everywhere and is also faulty in its layout. If our aim is to have a successful teaching of secular and nationalist history, the madrasas are not the main defaulters at all. Insofar as they offer free or subsidised teaching to children, try to preserve a continuity between home and school and invest in most of the paraphernalia of modern schooling, they are indeed institutions to be emulated. Their teaching of history is not as bad as in our municipal schools and little private schools, and sometimes as good or better than in our grand private schools. It can certainly be improved in numerous ways, but none of these ways would be specific to the madrasa and would apply equally to the large variety of institutions and children in India.

Footnotes:

* The name of this madrasa and most others, unless in a citation, has been changed.

1. Speech by the President of India, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, in Hyderabad, July 2002, for which I presume his speechwriters should be held responsible.

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