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Identifying the Status of Literacy Skills in Marginalised Institutions

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Abstract

The current status of learning and teaching English language in marginalised institutions, particularly maktabs[1], madrasas[2] or jamias[3] are entirely ignored and also are marked by disparities and inequities. Meanwhile, English is a lingua franca, enabling communication across borders, cultures, and languages. Therefore, it is considered a passport to connect to the global world.

Because of ignorance of English language in the curriculum of aforesaid marginalized institutions, the students face several challenges such as their threshold level of functional English. In addition, they often lack English proficiency to compete with mainstreaming learners for getting employment opportunities. As a result, the products of these marginalised institutions mainstreaming job opportunities.

The paper focuses on the status and need for functional literacy to maximize the demographic dividend from a largely young population of the disadvantage section of the society having no access to the required mainstream-level skills and related job opportunities.

Keywords: English Language, Marginalised Institutions, Mainstreaming, Employment

1. Introduction

Maktabs, madrasas and jamias, religious-centric educational institutes, are one of the marginalised institutions of the nation that cater to religious education for Muslim children whose status is the most deprived, underprivileged and isolated compared to the other marginalised institutions. The madrasa community is the nation's most vulnerable and overwhelmed group (Sachar et al., 2006; Nash, 2020). These marginalised institutes impart primary and advanced education but fail to cater to mainstream needs. The products of these marginalised institutions (*ulema*[4]) get less interaction beyond their community. They lack exposure to mainstreaming, training and development opportunities for gainful employment. Henceforth, they remain relatively isolated and marginalised. Disconnection with other communities builds a wall of separateness, isolation, and societal marginalisation (Neha, 2020).

2. The status of English in Indian madrasas

English language provides an affordable training environment and mainstream competitive culture of education and the job market. It is a tool that opens up a whole new world for people and slowly makes its way into the madrasa education system (Nehal, 2021). General English is now being taught in almost all government-aided government madrasas. It is part of the modernisation programme introduced by the State as an initiative to improve the prospects of madrasa products. Despite this, English has not

received great emphasis until now and is not flourishing in madrasas. The centrality of the English language in madrasas needs a great focus because, in the fast-moving world, it is the language of international communication, the media and the internet, so learning English is essential for socialising and interaction. That is why not having English is to be marginalised and excluded (Salma & Nehal, 2017).

Recently, the winds of change have been seen in the Hindi heartland. Most autonomous madrasas have started teaching the English language by seeing the pace of the modernity of the world's needs and demands of English to bring the madrasa students' products to the mainstream and enable them to compete for their careers (Outlook, 2013). Markazul Ma'arif Education & Research Centre (MMERC), an NGO established by Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, prepares madrasa graduates with good English and communication skills to meet modern needs and play a more meaningful role in society. MMERC conducts a two-year intensive Diploma in English Language and Literature (DELL) for the madrasa products (Rahman, 2019). Still, most orthodox administrators of the private madrasas continued their negative perception of the teaching-related English language that was at the time Britishers, and they were not ready to teach English in their respective institutions.

English becomes an increasingly significant part of the madrasa curriculum to increase students' career options, reply to queries about Islam, and demystify religion. Parents want their children to be equipped with the skills required for jobs, mainstreaming, and the proper understanding of their religion. A paradigm shift in the madrasa education system is related to the English language. Erstwhile madrasa community considered it a threat to their identity (Rahman, 2019; Rahmani, 2010; Jhingran, 2010; Nehal, Salma, & Husain, 2016). It is entirely different today. In an interview with a researcher at EFL University, Sajida Sultana reports that teachers encourage students to learn English language and consider learning English as *ibadat*[5](Sultana, 2015).

3. The pedagogy of English language in Indian madrasas

Madrasas are the centre of teaching traditional subjects; therefore, traditional teaching methods dominate teaching all subjects. In traditional methods, a teacher controls learning, and teachers are considered knowledge bearers responsible for all learning. English is also treated as a religious and traditional subject; subsequently, it is taught with the traditional method. This method was used for teaching Latin and Greek as a second language to English native speakers in the 16th century and was revived in the 19th century. In the 21st century, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) is outdated, but it is used frequently in most madrasas where English is offered. The essential techniques for teaching English are rote learning, drill practices, and memorisation. The students of the madrasa sometimes memorise entire prescribed course books in English. The madrasa community believes they become experts if they learn to structure the language. Because of this, the teaching of grammar in English is prioritised in the madrasas. Extra focus is given to grammar teaching and learning of English language. In terms of commercial demands, the English curriculum is highly outdated. The English language syllabus in Indian madrasas does not provide the students and teachers with the functional English language competence necessary for daily life. As a result, practical approaches to English are missing in madrasas and fail to fulfil the needs and demands of madrasa stakeholders of English in the daily routine. Madrasa stakeholders also lack a basic teaching methodology for English communication due to an acute shortage of infrastructure and facilities (Nehal, 2021). Thus, lack of proper infrastructure, outdated curriculum and poor quality of education make madrasa learners distanced from the national market.

4. Practical needs of English language for madrasa learners

At present, it has become necessary for madrasa students to learn English. Graddol (2010) reports, 'We are fast moving into a world in which not to have English is to be marginalised and excluded' (Ghodke, 2015:98). He also believes that English is a suitable catalyst for significant societal change. It is an essential skill necessary for employment and social inclusion. Even within India, English has become a link language (Ghodke, 2015).

It must also be remembered that being a Muslim, it is mandatory to convey the message of Islam to the world. Muslims must bear witness to the truth that it is a need globally because English has become an international language, and now English has the status of lingua franca in the world. With the advent of the internet, the world has become a global family (Mazhari, 2014), in which English is the only medium for new generations through which the teaching of Islam can be taught (M. K. Qasmi, 2005; M. S. Qasmi, 2005; M. B. Qasmi, 2005).

Today, English is the language of millions of Muslims in Europe, America and Africa. This language is of the utmost importance for their guidance and communication. At the political and journalistic level, it is estimated that the West currently controls more than 90% of the world's media, with the United States and the United Kingdom at the forefront. Jews are involved in major international news and print media organisations. Thus, the vilest forms of truth-telling are emerging in the filthy things about Islam and Muslims through them. Some may be surprised that the Arabic media themselves rely on the same percentage of Western sources and foreign news agencies for local or international news and political analysis (Mazhari, 2014).

English is most helpful in understanding and answering the Orientalists' misconceptions about Islam. Maulana Mohammad Rizwan Al-Qasimi writes, 'In today's world, English is the industrial and scientific language at the international level, and geographically, Hindi is the most important language for us… Since the scholars are unfamiliar with these languages, they are unaware of the misconceptions spread in them and the new generation who have read them because of economic and industrial requirements. Other nations read literature in the same language that Orientalists and anti-Islamic writers often write when they want to study Islam. They get the hatred of Islam in their hearts.…to meet the modern challenge, at least the students at Islamic schools must keep an eye on these double standards to read the critics of sincere Islam and play a leading role in the modern circle' (cited in Mazhari, 2014:202). Mullah Tariq Rashid Farangi Ali, an influential scholar, says that some scholars also think that by including English in the curriculum of madrasas, the students who are learning it will deviate from Islam and will be trapped in the world's lurch, but this is an entirely wrong idea. If our scholars want to address the Muslim generation, they must know English. If English and modern subjects are included in the syllabus of madrassas, then one of the significant benefits would be that even the children of prosperous and affluent families would turn to madrassas. At present, only boys from low-income families join madrasas. Middle-class parents prefer to send their children to modern or regular schools. Because in this way, the child's financial future can be secured according to them. Inclusive learning of modern subjects, especially English language and religious education will provide opportunities for mainstreaming and employment (Mazhari, 2014). However, the inclusion of English language in the madrasa syllabus is an essential requirement of the time, which is an obvious matter for the eyes and thinking minds to see the loss of negligence and blindness.

Maulana Waheeduddin Khan, a leading Islamic scholar in India, says that our *ulema* can achieve nobility without knowing modern sciences and English. Still, they cannot be the leaders heading the

movements. He referred to the *ulemas* of Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordoba, who were also the nation's leaders besides being great scholars. The *ulema* of today has become only the teachers of the madrasas. They have nothing to do with the society outside the madrasa. He opines that English and other modern sciences do not need to be taught as compulsory subjects but should be put on the syllabus for the student's choice (optional subject). Those who are interested in it can learn it also. Explaining his view, he says that he has attended many international conferences. He found that many people from other religions could represent their views and thoughts in English, but our community lacks such people. Therefore, our madrasas are responsible for producing scholars who can participate in these seminars and represent Islam to the people (M. S. Qasmi, 2005).

5. Conclusion

A mix of approaches identifies the status of English language teaching and learning in Indian madrasas. It has varying levels of implementation. Some madrasas have recognised the need for English language skills. Still, progress must be made in ensuring comprehensive and practical integration. Madrasa communities face massive challenges while teaching and learning English language due to the orthodoxy nature of madrasas. The pedagogical method and curriculum of Indian madrasas, particularly in autonomous North Indian madrasas, remain outdated, and there is a desperate need for reform. Despite the urgent need for reform in the curriculum of private madrasas, many orthodox influential *ulemas* and *muhtamim*[6] are still against the teaching and learning of English language. They argue that the job of madrasas is not to produce engineers or doctors, and its primary objective is to produce spiritual/ religious leaders such as *ulemas* or *muftis*[7] (Wani & Kidwai, 2021). As a result, the curriculum lacks scientific and modern subjects, and the products of such madrasas face difficulties getting jobs and mainstreaming for higher education (Husain, Nehal & Ahmad, 2024). Further research and focused initiatives are necessary to bridge the gap between religious education and the benefits of English language learning and teaching; ultimately, it empowers madrasa learners with holistic educational opportunities for their future endeavours.

Notes

[1]Muslim elementary school
[2]A College or institution of higher education for Islamic instruction
[3]It refers in official usage to a university
[4]Ulema is a body of Muslim scholars with specialist knowledge of Islamic sacred law and theology.
[5]It has multiple meanings in English, including 'worship', 'prayer', and 'servitude'.
[6]It has multiple meaning in English, including 'manager', 'administration', and 'superintendent'.
[7]A mufti is a professional jurist who interprets Muslim law

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