Poisoned chalice? English at an Islamic university in Kerala[1]

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Is it possible to teach the English language without teaching 'western values'?

Post 9/11, traditional Islamic educational institutions, better known by their Arabic name 'madrasas', have been catapulted into the foreground of heated and at times shrill debates on modernization and reform (Malik, 2008; Noor et al., 2008; Riaz, 2008; Hefner, 2009). Discussions on reforming the madrasa system revolve around, among other things, introducing 'modern' education in the madrasas and the role of English in this process. Contrary to popular assumptions, however, such tensions are nothing new. On the contrary, the madrasa has witnessed recurrent attempts at reform in Muslim societies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the eleventh century, when it first emerged as the pivotal centre of Islamic higher learning, the madrasa has undergone many changes, adapting in varying degrees to local cultures and changing times (Zaman, 1999). Nevertheless, these changes and reforms may not necessarily conform to the standards set by Western liberalism and it would be a gross mistake to judge the success, merit and relevance of the madrasa through the prism of such a discourse, given that the very raison d'être of madrasas is the production, dissemination, promotion and preservation of Islamic learning in a modern world which has brought into sharp relief the divide between the religious and the private on the one hand, and the secular and the public on the other, a distinction with little precedent in earlier Muslim societies. It is modernity that constructed the notion of religion as occupying a distinct sphere in society. Developments in modern Europe, and especially the impact of the Enlightenment, have led not merely to the subordination of religion to the state or the confinement of the former to the sphere of 'private' life but also to 'the construction of religion as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practised in one's spare time. This construction of religion ensures that it is part of what is inessential to our common politics, economy, science, and morality' (Asad, 1993: 207).

In India, familiar distinctions between religious and secular learning have been invoked in colonial analyses of the madrasas, quite as much as in those of other educational institutions. This invocation was found necessary by the British in their effort to understand and regulate the systems of education prevalent in India, to relate them to their own ideas of how education ought to be imparted and to what end, and to reform the local systems in view of their own perceptions. Interestingly, this colonial

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doi:10.1017/S0266078413000266
English Today 115, Vol. 29, No. 3 (September 2013). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2013 Cambridge University Press

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category was also internalized by the ulema (Muslim scholars) of the times (Zaman, 1999). Subsequently, the modern madrasas established during colonial times aimed to guard the private sphere of Muslims from modernist intrusions. Contemporary madrasas continue to use the colonial dichotomy of public and private spheres to resist state intrusions in their pursuit of a particular kind of religious education. Be that as it may, madrasas in India, as elsewhere, have developed their own ways of responding to the changes of the times and always have been in the throes of educational reforms of their own. One of the ways in which they have tried to negotiate modernity as well as their identity has been to introduce modern disciplines like English into their curricula without diluting their essentially religious character (Zaman, 1999). Such an inclusion is justified by the invocation of the Islamic notion of useful knowledge (*al-'ilm al-nafi*), in that a fairly good knowledge of English is considered indispensable for disseminating the message of Islam worldwide. Whether such an initiative is ultimately in the interests of religious learning or counterproductive is still a bone of contention among the ulema and the fear of English eating into the province of religious disciplines that are the life force of madrasas has not been entirely without substance. This shows the precarious standing of English as a modern discipline in the curricula of contemporary madrasas.

Against this backdrop, I would like to analyse the dynamics of the learning, teaching and use of English at Darul Huda Islamic University, a twenty-five-year-old Islamic learning centre in a district of the largest Muslim population in Kerala. This centre was established in 1986 by the leaders of the Sunni Mahallu Federation, a feeder wing of the All Kerala Federation of Sunni Ulema, on an experimental basis as an improvement upon the existing traditional Islamic institutions popularly known as 'mosque schools'.

Darul Huda Islamic University is arguably the State's flagship Islamic learning centre, offering upper primary, secondary, intermediate and advanced courses (including undergraduate and postgraduate courses) spread over a period of 12 years. Located in the village of Chemmad in Malappuram district, the heartland of the Mapilla Muslims of Malabar, this institution is the boldest initiative ever undertaken by Kerala's Sunni ulema to promote reforms in their madrasa system and English has been a compulsory subject in its curriculum since its inception in 1986. At present, Darul Huda has more than 1000 students and almost 60 teachers on its rolls.[2]

This institution has grown into a fully-fledged Islamic university only recently, following its recognition by the Federation of Islamic Universities based in Cairo, Egypt. The university started merely as a pilot project, but soon carved out a space for itself in the religious education scenario in the state and has now as its affiliates numerous Islamic degree colleges across Kerala and beyond.

The aim of this university is to train a generation of young Muslim scholars who are capable of spreading the message of Islam the world over. A language barrier among the contemporary ulema seemed to stand in the way of their interacting with the world beyond home. Similarly, the lack of a basic familiarity with modern disciplines and technology also prevented the ulema from effectively responding to the changes of the times. This led the Muslim scholars and educationists in Kerala to rethink the prevalent religious education system. Concerted efforts were soon afoot to establish centres of higher Islamic learning which sought to bring under one single roof both the so-called religious and modern education. Darul Huda was the most significant development in this regard.

It is worthy of mention that Darul Huda gives great importance to language learning with English, along with Arabic, Urdu and Malayalam, the mother tongue, becoming subjects in the curriculum almost on a par with, but not at all at the expense of, leading Islamic sciences such as Quranic exegesis, Hadith and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The spirit behind this move is religious in that students who are prospective preachers of Islam achieve adequate mastery over these languages, not least English, in order for them to carry out their responsibilities towards their faith in a more meaningful fashion in a world of unprecedented change in all walks of life.

Let us now consider in more detail the rationale behind the teaching of English at this university. As scholars have pointed out, student motivation, social desirability, and feasibility are essential to the examination and evaluation of a course of study (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Lukmani, 1992; Agnihotri & Khanna, 1997). A key notion of attitudinal studies is the distinction between integrative and instrumental orientation. The concept of integrative orientation focuses on students' desire to integrate themselves with the culture of the community associated with the language they study, for instance, English. On the other hand, instrumental orientation is concerned with the purpose of studying a particular language only to

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achieve some specific goals, such as employability, while holding fast to one's own culture and ethos.

As a matter of policy, Darul Huda has envisaged its English programmes in such a way that students are encouraged to be instrumentally oriented to study the English language. The difference in orientation between teaching English as an instrument of communication and teaching it in order for the student to appreciate 'literature' is central to this policy. The university treads the instrumental path lest the literature classroom should 'shape the mind of the student so that it can resemble the mind of the so-called implied reader of the literary text' (Spivak, 1992: 276). Many critics have already dwelt on the imperial agenda of using English literature as an instrument of ideology (Viswanathan, 1990). As is evident from the history of education in British India, English as the study of culture, with such values as the 'proper' development of character, or the shaping of critical thought or the formation of the aesthetic sense assigned to it, had already established itself as an academic subject in the British Indian curriculum way back in the 1820s when England was still under the spell of the classical curriculum (Viswanathan, 1990). The project of empire betrays how best English literature served as a vehicle for ideological transformation. Given these ideological imbrications of English Studies with imperialism and Eurocentrism, it is no surprise that the ulema, even as they promote the study of the English language, have been on their guard against teaching English literature as a course of study in their institutions. The ulema had to do a difficult balancing act here: while getting students to acquire good functional English, they had to see to it that such a move should not jeopardize the learning of Islamic sciences which are the very life force of Muslim religious institutions. At Darul Huda, English is not taught as an end in itself, but rather as a means to the ultimate end of disseminating the message of Islam cutting across national barriers. Therefore, unlike regular universities, the students of this institution are not encouraged to pursue English literature as an academic discipline. Instead, they are constantly motivated to gain a good command of English so as to express themselves most effectively in the language for their own purposes. The idea is to assert one's religious identity by negotiating and engaging modernity, and mastering English is considered to be the best possible way to speak and write back, Caliban-like. This is a 'strategic', utilitarian, 'study words, not ideas' approach to English, the self-same approach the British, like Lord Curzon, resented while bemoaning the failure of English literary education in India (Viswanathan, 1990).

However, the general problem of English education in India, with all its ideological baggage, is further aggravated in the case of the contemporary Indian Muslim, the custodian of a faith whose relation to modern liberal ethos is all the more porous. Emptying English of its ideological and cultural kernel is easier said than done. Embracing English while at the same time resisting/rejecting all that it stands for has been a litmus test for the graduates of this university; and their struggles, whether successful or not, to cope with a love-hate relationship with English, a language they are drawn to, yet warned against, have far-reaching consequences for their future endeavours as ulema, professional or not.

The allure of English on one hand is counterpoised by its perceived threat, on the other, to the religious identity of the institution and its graduates who grapple with the pushes and pulls of a modern world. This ambivalence about English, or what Spivak (1992) calls 'the burden of English', is most evident when one explores this new Islamic university's tryst with the language. The pedagogical, social and psychological aspects of English education at this traditional Sunni centre of learning in Kerala shed light on how and why English is employed by the contemporary ulema to negotiate Islam, identity and modernity. A sustained ethnography of the graduates of this university will help thicken the description of whether English will turn out to be a poisoned chalice in traditional Islamic institutions as they grapple with the complexities of the modern globalized world.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the National Seminar on English Language Education in India: Theory and Practice at the School of Humanities, University of Hyderabad, India, 23–25 January 2012. My thanks are due to all those who gave incisive comments and criticisms at the seminar.

2 All information on this university, including the curricula for various programmes of study, can be obtained from the official website of the university: http://www.darulhuda.com/

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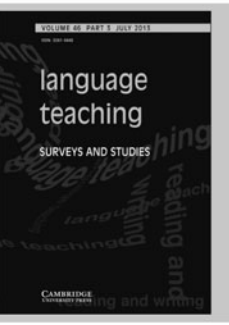

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