

The Genesis and Architectural Integration of Early Islamic Educational Institutions in the Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

This study investigates the historical trajectory and structural evolution of Islamic educational institutions during the early periods of Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent. Historically, Islamic civilization established prominent centers of learning across regions such as Andalusia, Egypt, and Iran. However, early historiography often marginalized the educational developments in India, a gap initially reflected but later corrected in the writings of scholars like Allama Shibli Nomani. By analysing scattered Persian historical texts, this paper reveals that early Indian Islamic education was not exclusively reliant on standalone madrasas. Instead, academic instruction was deeply integrated into multipurpose architectural structures, including grand mosques, Sufi khanqahs, and monumental tombs. Furthermore, this research highlights the curriculum development and critical role of royal patronage, particularly during the Ghaznavid era. Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi and his successor, Sultan Masud, transformed their territories into academic hubs, inspiring state nobles to extensively fund and construct madrasas and mosques, thereby laying the foundational network of Islamic education in the region.

Keywords: Islamic Institutional/Madrasas, Educational development, makhtabs, Nesab, Nahu -Meer, Sarf-Meer-,Mantiq, Balaghat.

Introduction

Muslims inherently viewed teaching, learning, and the financial support of students and scholars as a religious obligation and an act of continuous charity. Because establishing schools and endowing educational resources were integrated into daily religious life, ancient historians did not record them as exceptional historical events in separate chapters. Historians of the past typically summarized a ruler's public works using general phrasing, such as noting that a king "built buildings and places of charity (بِقَاعِ خَيْر)". In this context, "places of charity" broadly encompassed madrasas, maktabas (primary schools), mosques, and khanqahs (Sufi lodges). A decree by Emperor Akbar explicitly stated that knowledge and arts should be propagated so that talented individuals are not deprived, ensuring their legacy remains. Ancient Khanqahs (Sufi monasteries) were heavily utilized as schools. Sufi saints and spiritual leaders viewed the teaching of both esoteric (spiritual) and exoteric (worldly) sciences as their true objective. A significant portion of the state grants and personal endowments given to these khanqahs was spent directly on the large congregations of students residing there. The tombs built for kings and revered saints were often constructed with surrounding chambers specifically designed to operate as madrasas. The structural layouts of surviving ancient tombs in Delhi, Agra, Ahmedabad, and Bijapur—such as the tombs of Alauddin Khalji and Humayun—still reflect this dual architectural purpose today. (1)

Ruler	Notable Contributions to Education
Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni	After returning from the conquest of Kannauj in 409 AH, he laid the foundation for a grand Jama Masjid and a madrasa in Ghazni. He stocked the madrasa with rare manuscripts and allocated substantial endowments for its maintenance. His nobles and state officials mirrored this passion, establishing mosques and madrasas throughout their respective territories, thereby introducing this educational model to India.
Sultan Shihab-ud-Din Mas'ud	Succeeding Sultan Mahmud, he was a great patron of scholars. Scholars dedicated books to him, such as <i>Fiqh-e-Mas'udi</i> by Qazi Abu Muhammad Nasahi and <i>Qanun-e-Mas'udi</i> by the unparalleled mathematician/astronomer Abu Rayhan Khwarizmi, who was heavily rewarded with silver. Mas'ud established countless madrasas and mosques early in his reign.
Shihab-ud-Din Muhammad Ghuri	After 175 years of Ghaznavid rule, the empire transitioned to the Ghurids in 582 AH following the defeat of Khusrau Malik in Lahore. Muhammad Ghuri conquered Ajmer in 588 AH and established several madrasas there, which are considered among the oldest Islamic educational institutions in India. (2)

Early Madrasas :

The Ghaznavid Centres in Lahore (11th Century)

While specific institutional names from this era are scarce in surviving state chronicles, the foundation of Islamic education in South Asia began here. Following the Ghaznavid conquests, Lahore was developed into a "Smaller Ghazni." The ruling class established mosques and adjacent *khanqahs* (Sufi hospices) that functioned as the first formal centers of Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and literature in the subcontinent, heavily emulating Khurasanian educational models.(3)

Madrasa-i-Mu'izzi (Late 12th / Early 13th Century)

Named in honor of the Ghurid conqueror Mu'izzuddin Muhammad Ghori, these were among the very first state-sponsored madrasas established after the consolidation of the Delhi Sultanate. Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish established prominent branches in both Delhi and Badaun. Badaun, in particular, was a massive center of scholarly activity before Delhi fully eclipsed it. These institutions were critical for training the *qazis* (judges) and administrators needed to run the newly established empire.(4)

Madrasa-i-Nasiriya (Mid-13th Century)

Located in Delhi, this madrasa was named in honor of either Prince Nasiruddin Mahmud (Iltutmish's eldest son) or the later Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud. It is one of the most well-documented early madrasas because the famous historian Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani was appointed as its principal (*Sadr*) and head *qazi* in 1237. The institution exemplifies how scholarly bureaucratic families migrating from Central Asia and Khurasan integrated into the Hindustani state apparatus.(5)

Madrasa-i-Firoz Shahi at Hauz Khas (14th Century)

Built by Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq in 1352 on the banks of the Hauz Khas reservoir in Delhi. This is the quintessential example of the "organic process tied to religious architecture" that you mentioned in your article. It was a massive, L-shaped architectural complex integrating a mosque, a royal tomb, and multi-tiered residential quarters for students and teachers. It was heavily endowed through state *waqf* (charitable trusts) and attracted scholars from across the Islamic world.(6)

Madrasa of Mahmud Gawan (Late 15th Century)

Moving beyond the northern political chronicles into the Deccan, this madrasa was built in 1472 in Bidar by the Bahmani prime minister, Khwaja Mahmud Gawan. It is architecturally striking because it directly imported Timurid and Khurasanian architectural styles (featuring brilliant Persian tilework and massive minarets) into South India. It housed a legendary library containing over 3,000 manuscripts and provided free accommodation and stipends to its students.(7)

Madrasas of Ajmer:

According to *Taj-ul-Ma'asir* (the oldest Persian history of India, authored by Hasan Nizami Nishapuri), Sultan Shihab-ud-Din Muhammad Ghuri established multiple madrasas in Ajmer shortly after its conquest in 588 AH. Because of their early establishment date, these institutions represent some of the oldest recorded Islamic madrasas on the Indian subcontinent. (8)

Challenges:

Challenges of Indian Educational History:

The transition from traditional, event-based political history to the study of social and educational life presents a major methodological challenge: information regarding early Islamic madrasas is heavily fragmented. Because traditional Persian chronicles were designed primarily to record dynastic successions, military campaigns, and royal lineages, details about educational systems, student life, and the cultural impact of madrasas appear only incidentally and are scattered throughout political narratives. (9)

Key Themes in Reconstructing Subcontinent Madrasa History:

To properly uncover the history of early Islamic education in India, historians must address several archival and methodological hurdles highlighted in the text:

The Nature of Fragmented Sources:

Persian chronicles, legal treatises, and administrative decrees (*firman*s) contain valuable data about religious and cultural life. However, because early historians viewed education as a routine religious duty rather than a standalone political event, educational data is buried within broader administrative records. Researchers must apply rigorous source criticism to evaluate the reliability and context of these traditional writings.

Archival Dispersion:

Tracing the history of Indian madrasas is complicated by the physical distribution of records. Important documents—such as royal decrees detailing land grants for educational purposes (*madad-i-ma'ash*)—are often dispersed across various state archives (e.g., in Rajasthan), private collections, or metropolitan centers due to colonial transfers.

Political Chronicles as Cultural Containers:

While texts like Urdu or Persian historiographies prioritize political narratives of Mughal or Rajput rulers, they simultaneously embed rich social and educational data. Historians must treat these chronicles as multilayered texts, systematically extracting incidental mentions of mosques, *khanqah*s, and educational endowments to render the history of early madrasas visible. (10)

Methodological Approaches for Historians:

To bridge the gaps left by traditional political chronicles, the text

advocates for a multi-faceted approach to recovering educational history:

1. Reading "Against the Grain:

Historians must move beyond an event-centered approach. By analysing administrative documents, legal records, and royal correspondence, researchers can reconstruct the social history of how educational systems developed and adapted to political changes across different eras.

2. Source Triangulation:

Extracting the history of Islamic education requires triangulating official political records with alternative sources. This includes cross-referencing imperial Persian epistemologies with documented oral traditions, community-based records, and local narratives (such as the *malfuzat* or discourses of Sufi saints) to create a historically grounded understanding of grassroots educational practices.

3. Recovering Marginalized Voices:

A significant gap in traditional political chronicles is the marginalization of women, despite their pivotal roles in shaping Islamic civilization and education. To fully understand the early Indian madrasa system, historians must actively interpret the "silences" in elite narratives to uncover the crucial contributions of female scholars and patrons, thereby deconstructing stereotypes and enriching the historical record. (11)

4. The Typology of Educational Spaces:

Unearthing Educational and Cultural History from Political Chronicles:

The shift from studying purely political events to exploring everyday life and cultural memory requires a new approach to historical research. The primary hurdle for modern historians is that details about social life and education are not neatly organized; rather, they are deeply buried and scattered across documents originally meant to record state politics and dynastic successions.

To trace how educational systems evolved in specific times and places, researchers must dig through a variety of historical documents, archives, and manuscripts to spot variations across different civilizations. (12)

Archives as the "Spaces" of Educational History :

In the context of regional Indian history, physical archival institutions serve as the primary spaces where fragmented educational and cultural data reside. The State Archives of Bikaner and Jaipur act as vital repositories storing a wealth of regional literature and Urdu historiography. These institutional spaces hold complex narratives detailing Rajput lineages, social customs, and the nuanced relationships between Rajput states and Mughal rulers. Persian sources—including legal treatises, biographies, and geographical descriptions—contain essential data on religious and cultural life but require rigorous evaluation regarding their authenticity and historical

context. These Persian records must be understood not just as simple descriptions, but as specific frameworks of knowledge shaped by imperial perspectives.(13)

Methodological Challenges in Extracting Data :

Because political chronicles were created to document wars and royal lineages, evidence of educational practices only appears by accident within the broader narrative. Historians face several hurdles when trying to extract this information: Cultural information is frequently buried within diplomatic correspondence or royal decrees rather than being sorted into distinct educational collections. The physical displacement of records—such as colonial archives being moved to metropolitan centers—strips native populations of access to their own historical sources. While modern digital archives offer an abundance of materials, this sheer volume creates practical difficulties in organizing and linking fragmented data.(14)

Reclaiming Marginalized Voices and Local Knowledge:

To build a complete picture of early educational and social history, researchers cannot rely on elite political texts alone. They must actively search for the voices missing from the dominant historical record. Traditional historiography has frequently minimized or completely ignored the vital intellectual and political contributions of women in classical Islamic civilizations. To bring female visibility back into the historical narrative of Islamic societies, scholars must carefully reinterpret existing historical sources. Historians must pair imperial written records with indigenous oral traditions, which act as living archives that transmit cultural knowledge and sacred geographies across generations. Grassroots communities can effectively protect their own collective memory by moving from static documentation to active, community-led digital preservation methods.(15)

The Ghaznavi Catalyst and Royal Patronage

Sultan Mahmud's Era:

Transition to the political stabilization under the Ghaznavids. While early entries into India were marked by military campaigns, Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi laid the groundwork for academic patronage.

Establishment of Infrastructure:

Detail the construction of the grand Jama Masjid and its accompanying madrasa in Ghazni, which housed a vast library of rare books.

The Evolution of the Ancient Arabic Curriculum/ Succession and Continued Patronage:

The research is heavily based on an article written by Maulana Syed Abdul Hai (former administrator of Nadwatul Ulama) published in the Al-Nadwa magazine in 1909.

The curriculum's evolution is classified into four primary periods to

make the historical progression easier to understand.(16)

1. The First Period (7th to 10th Century Hijri)

This era spanned approximately two hundred years and focused on subjects like Arabic morphology (Sarf), syntax (Nahw), rhetoric (Balaghat), jurisprudence (Fiqh), logic (Mantiq), theology (Kalam), mysticism (Tasawwuf), and Hadith.

Key Books Taught:

Grammar & Syntax: Misbah, Kafia, Lubab-ul-Albab, and Irshad.

Jurisprudence (Fiqh): Hidayah, Manar, and Usul-e-Bazdawi.

Tafsir (Exegesis): Madarik, Baidawi, and Kashshaf.

Tasawwuf: Awarif, Fusus-ul-Hikam, Naqd-un-Nusus, and Lama'at.

Hadith: Mashariq-ul-Anwar and Masabih-us-Sunnah.

Adab (Literature): Maqamat-e-Hariri (often memorized by students).

Educational Focus:

Fiqh and Usul-e-Fiqh were considered the highest standard of excellence during this time, mirroring the heavy emphasis placed on logic and philosophy in later eras.

Conversely, the science of Hadith received less attention, to the point where scholars during Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq's reign prioritized Fiqh rulings over direct Hadith citations during religious debates.(17)

2. The Second Period (Late 9th Century Hijri Onwards)

This period began during the reign of Sikandar Lodi, marked by the arrival of scholars like Sheikh Abdullah and Sheikh Azizullah from Multan to Delhi and Sambhal.

Curriculum Shifts:

The standard of excellence shifted towards rational sciences (Maqulat).

New texts on logic and theology were introduced, such as *Sharah Matali* and *Sharah Mawaqif*.

Other additions included *Mukhtasar*, *Mutawwal*, *Sharah Aqaid Nasafi*, *Sharah Waqaya*, and *Sharah Jami*.

Towards the end of this period, Sheikh Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlavi returned from the Hejaz and successfully revitalized the study of Hadith in India. (18)

3. The Third Period (The Era of Akbar to Shah Jahan)

The curriculum saw further massive additions with the arrival of Shah Fathullah Shirazi in Emperor Akbar's court, who was given the title "Azud-ul-Mulk".

Key Additions:

Books by Mir Ghiyasuddin Mansur, Mir Sadruddin, and Jalaluddin Dawwani became popular.

Philosophy and Logic: Sadra, Shams Bazigha, Sharah Hidayat-ul-Hikma.

Kalam (Theology): Sharah Aqaid Nasafi with Hashiya Khayali, Sharah Mawaqif.

Balaghah & Nahw: Mukhtasar, Mutawwal, Sharah Jami.

Hadith & Tafsir: Mishkat-ul-Masabih, Shama'il Tirmidhi, partial Sahih Bukhari, and Tafsir Madarik/Baidawi.

The Fourth Period (12th Century Hijri to Present)

This period was initiated by Mulla Nizamuddin, who laid the foundation for the highly influential curriculum known as "Dars-e-Nizami".

Expanded Syllabus (Dars-e-Nizami):

Sarf (Morphology): Mizan, Munsha'ib, Sarf Meer, Panj Ganj, Zubda, Fusool-e-Akbari, Shafiya.

Nahw (Syntax): Nahw Meer, Sharah Miata Amil, Hidayat-un-Nahw, Kafia, Sharah Jami.

Mantiq (Logic): Sughra, Kubra, Isaghoji, Tahzeeb, Sharah Tahzeeb, Qutbi, Sullam-ul-Uloom.

Mathematics & Astronomy: Khulasat-ul-Hisab, Tahrir Uqlidis, Tashrih-ul-Aflak, Risala Qushji.

Advanced Texts: Mukhtasar Ma'ani, Sharah Waqaya, Hidayat, Noor-ul-Anwar, Taudheeh Talweeh, Musallam-ul-Thuboot.

Core Philosophy of Dars-e-Nizami: The primary objective of this curriculum was to instil strong comprehension and analytical power in students, enabling them to study independently and master any text, rather than simply forcing them to read a high volume of books.(19)

Emulation by the Nobility

The Trickle-Down Effect:

Analyse how the scholarly interests of the rulers influenced the ruling elite. According to historical accounts by Farishta, the nobles and officials closely emulated the Sultan, leading to a widespread, privately funded network of madrasas across the empire's territories. (19)

Conclusion

The foundation of Islamic education in early India was a deeply organic process, one inextricably tied to religious architecture and propelled by the cultural emulation of the Ghaznavid courts. Ultimately, the fragmentation of this educational history within the broader political chronicles of the subcontinent is not merely an obstacle, but a vital opportunity for methodological innovation. By combining traditional source criticism with interdisciplinary methods and community-based archival recovery, historians can transform scattered political records into a comprehensive picture of early Islamic educational life. More importantly, this approach safeguards the integrity of original sources and restores the agency of communities whose histories have been dispersed, fragmented, and often silenced within the dominant narrative structures of state-centric

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chronicles. Recognizing the complexity of these multifaceted institutions is, therefore, crucial for piecing together a complete and nuanced picture of South Asian historical heritage.



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