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Teaching English to the Marginalized: A Study of the Belief and Perceptions towards ELT Practices in Madrasas

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Abstract

Madrasas (i.e. Islamic Seminaries) have been one of the early and formidable opponents of English education and culture in India. For them, English was not just a language used for communication purposes but an ideology and worldview that had the potential to alter their religious and socio-cultural identity. They largely remained reluctant to reform calls and strongly opposed the incorporation of English in Madrasa curriculum. After the independence an improvement was sought on their part but the hypotheses says that the status quo is maintained and positive changes are yet to be introduced into Madrasa education system. Nowadays, call for Madrasa modernization has gained momentum and on the pretext of reforms a number of changes are being made. This study shall collect data from Madrasa students and English language teachers at Bridge Course and various Madrasas of North India. This experiment might prove an eye-opener in various terms. Through in-person interviews and questionnaire, this paper shall record the perception and attitudinal changes of Madrasa graduates towards English language and its teaching practices in Islamic seminaries. It will also look into the belief and motivation of English language teachers and ELT culture in Madrasas.

Keywords: *Madrasa, ELT, Religious Education, Modern Education*

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Introduction

“..... A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

“Indian in blood and color but English in tastes, opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

Macaulay Minutes, March 1835.

Ethnocentric tone of these two statements quoted from T.B. Macaulay's minutes help us in understanding the colonial agenda and mindset on education of its Indian subjects. The introduction of English in different walks of Indian life especially education, was a phase-wise implementation mechanism which gave a different color to the Indian education system. Famous 'Anglicist-Orientalist' controversy was in fact a tussle between English versus Indian languages and culture. Orientalists' stance paved way for Anglo-Vedic and Anglo-Arabic set of institutions while Anglicists' subscribed to the agenda and opinion of Christian missionaries and their education system.

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After 1837 that is post-Persian India witnessed a radical change towards English language education. A section of Bengali Brahmin and middle class Hindu community anticipated the countless number of job opportunities and other privileges available in the name of English and they started learning it. After making English the court language in 1837, Muslims were ousted from the employment avenues overnight. East India Company in 1844 advanced a step further and opened the door for high govt. jobs for Indians. Muslim population already antagonistic towards English education could not avail the opportunity and hence automatically slid down on margins. In 1854 'Wood's Dispatch' also known as 'Magna Carta' of English Education in India, provided the roadmap of the education in India. These steps greatly impacted the Indian attitude towards English. There emerged a group of people among Indians who advocated English education and declared it the need of the hour. Bengal presidency was at the helm of all these changes. Scholars like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekanand etc. thought of English a language of science, civilization and development. In 1823, Raja Ram Mohan Roy's famous letter to the then Governor General Lord Amherst, is an epic document in this regard. As a result of the efforts collectively made by the missionaries, social reformists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Anglicist Officials of East India Company; a group of middle class Bengali Hindu community received English education and secured the jobs and other allowances available under the East India Company.

As compared to other communities the colonial period for Indian Muslims proved a bit harder and more ruthless. It was because of a number of reasons.

1. In order to rule over India, Britishers had to replace Mughals who were predominantly Muslims, they were the arch-rivals and hence the subject of most of the atrocities and oppressions. Most of the colonial policies were intended to deprive the community of its rights and privileges. This undemocratic dealing of the affairs brought a wrench in their hearts and as a result a sort of enmity started mushrooming among the community members.
2. The famous revolt of 1857 and Fatawas first issued by Shah Waliullah's son Shah Abdulaziz in 1803 and later by Fazle Haq Kairabadi in 1857 played a very crucial role in developing an antagonism towards British. In later days the legacy was carried forward by Maulana Azad and others. Muslims' hatred towards English language and culture was a natural reaction to an enemy who regularly targeted their identity and authority. Ulemas were at the center of these anti-British movements and agitations; and as a result, colonial rule directed all its energy in suppressing Muslims especially Ulemas across the country. After the failure of 1857 revolt, it turned into a large-scale staged massacre.
3. Colonial Agenda of English education as evident in 'Anglicist-Orientalist Controversy' and reflected in their policies like Macaulay Minute, Woods dispatch etc. was to change the demography of India. Downward Filtration Theory was intended to educate a patch of Indians who could act as their agents among the colonized Indians. It was argued that the educating a few will ultimately trickle down to the rest. From religion to education and socio-cultural identity everything was jeopardized. Introduction of English education to alter the Indian identity was vehemently opposed and by Ulemas (Islamic religious leaders) including Gandhi in later days. They were at the frontline in this battle against colonial intent. Gandhi's idea of 'Nai Taleem' (i.e., famously known as Wardha Education System) and Ulema's movement to establish Madrasas including Nadwatul Ulama Lucknow and Darul Uloom Deoband was an attempt to preserve the composite identity of India against colonial identity. Missionaries were constantly targeting the religious fundamentals of both the communities Hindus and Muslims. Muslims were particularly conscious of their religious identities and hence a strong opposition to English education took the floor. Exclusion of English from Madrasa curriculum became a norm which in some cases still continues.
4. As compared to Hindu brethren, Muslim community received delayed reform calls. Bankim Chandra, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekanand, Dyananda Saraswati, Shri Aurobindo, Tagore etc. played very important roles in normalizing and finally accepting English education as a way to reform the society, promote scientific temperament, and logical thinking. Among Muslims throughout the 19th century we find only a single name who urged Muslims to get English education. It was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. His 'Madrasatul Uloom' (1875) and later 'Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College' (1877) employed English teachers to cater to English education so that Muslims could also come parallel with other communities.

2. Integration Issue, Socio-economic and Educational Status of Indian Muslims

Presently, Muslims are among the most marginalized communities in India. According to 'Sachar Committee' (2006) and various other reports like ICSSR, NCPCR, the socioeconomic and educational status of Indian Muslims is worse and below SCs and STs. According to 'Sachar Committee' around 4% Muslim students join Madrasas for their educational well-being; but this is a flawed data because Sachar commission had considered only those Madrasas which were recognized and registered under different states and central govt. authorities at that time, i.e., 2005. The number of non-recognized or not registered madrasas is far more than the data collected by 'Sachar Committee'. According to a recently-held survey of UP Govt, there are 25,000 Madrasas in UP only out of which 8,500 Madrasas are not recognized.

3. The Bridge Course

In the context of Madrasa Education and English language teaching post-independent India has been very unfortunate in terms of introducing a model that could integrate Madrasa education to mainstream education system of the country.

Madradas largely remained reluctant to reform and modernization calls and hence could not come parallel with mainstream education of the country.

Carrying forward the legacy of educating the Muslim community the Center for Promotion of Education and Cultural Advancement of Muslims of India (CPECAMI) Aligarh Muslim University introduced a one year course for Madrasa graduates in 2013. Bridge Course is an assembly of Madrasa graduates who belong to and represent different schools of thoughts across the country. This one year course was intended to bridge the gap between the traditional and modern education. From the day of its establishment, students of Bridge course have marked their presence with distinction in different departments of AMU and other universities in the country. The Bridge Course model is known for its emphasis and extraordinary attention to English language teaching and learning. The syllabus for English language teaching is very well designed. Covering LSRW skills it is quite dynamic, engaging and based on need analysis of the students and market. There are three classes, one hour each on daily basis, only to facilitate English language learning and communication.

4. ELT Culture in Madrasas and Teachers' Belief System

This is a matter of ontological and epistemological enterprise, i.e., the theory and concept of knowledge and its acquisition and also the nature and philosophy of being and its relationship with the world and reality, the Madrasa education system and its associates hold and represent at large. Muslims in general and Madrasa associates in particular, have drawn a very narrow ontological and epistemological version of life, being, knowledge and reality. It's a binary-driven labeling of world, life, knowledge and being which are not complementary rather a mutually conflicting set of dichotomies. There are two worlds broadly divided into Duniya (Worldly) and Aakhirat (Other-worldly). Worldly life or the life before death is reduced to nothing as compared to the Aakhirat i.e. the life and world after the death. First one is considered temporary and transitory while the latter one is permanent, infinite and unending. All the deeds and efforts of an individual ought to be done for the betterment of his/her Aakhirat. Worldly life is meant for nothing but preparation for the Aakhirat. Spiritual knowledge and being is given importance over material knowledge and pursuit of happiness. It's an idealist approach of life, knowledge and being where everything including all the sources of knowledge and reality converge to one single God.

In the context of this study the most important binary they have drawn is the duality of knowledge, education and scholarship. ELT culture and practices along with other modern subjects like science, math, logic etc. have a lot to do with this notion of knowledge and being. For them, the knowledge is divided into two segments i.e. Deeni (religious/otherworldly) and Duniawi (secular, worldly). This bifurcation of knowledge has given a way to two radically different perspectives and also two set of institutions to facilitate them. Beholders of the first idea believe that the knowledge of Deen is the actual and ultimate knowledge. This is the essence of one's life and an individual must equip himself/herself with this knowledge so that it could make him/her successful in both the world i.e. Duniya (worldly life) and Aakhirat (the life after death). A set of subjects and disciplines are identified which lead to Ma'rifat i.e. realization of one, single God. Acquisition of religious knowledge; Quran and Hadith being the main sources, is preferred to and prioritized over worldly knowledge. This belief system has branded academic disciplines/subjects and institutions facilitating and representing them as 'Deeni/Shar'ie Taleem' (religious/traditional) and 'Duniawi/GhairShar'ie Taleem' (modern/secular). Madrasa Education system and its objectives largely conform and subscribe to the first idea of knowledge and education and hence not only English but also other major contemporary subjects like science, math, logic, philosophy etc. are not part of Madrasa Curriculum. This dichotomy of religious/traditional education and modern/secular education rests at their places without any mutual interests and correspondence. By not incorporating English and other modern subjects, Madrasas seem to deny modern concept of knowledge. Islamic knowledge is prioritized and taken as the only true knowledge and scholarship.

In the context of Madrasa education religious knowledge is the guarantor of their worldly and heavenly wellbeing. English as once been a language of the enemy and later the language of science and technology representing modern education was of no work and value of their interests largely defined in terms and concepts of religious knowledge and education. It could not turn up into the ambit of their priorities and could not lead Madrasas towards a healthy ELT culture and practice.

5. Methodology and Data Collection

As a participant observer the researchers have undergone the experience of English language teaching and learning at Bridge Course. Data is collected from both the students and English language teachers at 'Bridge Course' and in Madrasas.

Participants: Responses were collected from 80 students, 60 boys and 20 girls, from 8 different Madrasas and 20 English language teachers 5 female and 15 male currently teaching in different Madrasas of Uttar Pradesh, India.

Tools: Blended, bilingual mode questionnaire, containing six questions for the teachers and seven for the students covering different aspects of English language practices, perceptions and belief system. In-person interviews were also conducted in some responses.

6. Interpretation of the Data

As elaborated above, the dichotomy of modern and religious knowledge has deeply reflected in the opinions and practices of Madrasa English language teachers. In order to have an insight into the same a set of six questions were framed for Madrasa English language teachers. Given below are the questions and responses in the form of diagrams and a brief interpretation appended to each.

6.1. Questionnaire for Teachers

Q.1. Is the Teaching and Learning of English Language against Islamic Ethos and Identity?

As it is evident from the introduction section of this paper, there was a time when antagonism towards English language and culture had become a norm. Since Muslim Ulemas were at the forefront of this trend it was automatically taken synonymous to the Islam. Teaching and learning English was considered an anti-Islamic move. Now this trend has faded away from the collective memory of the community. Learning English does not jeopardize the identity of muslims nor it is anti-Islamic any more.

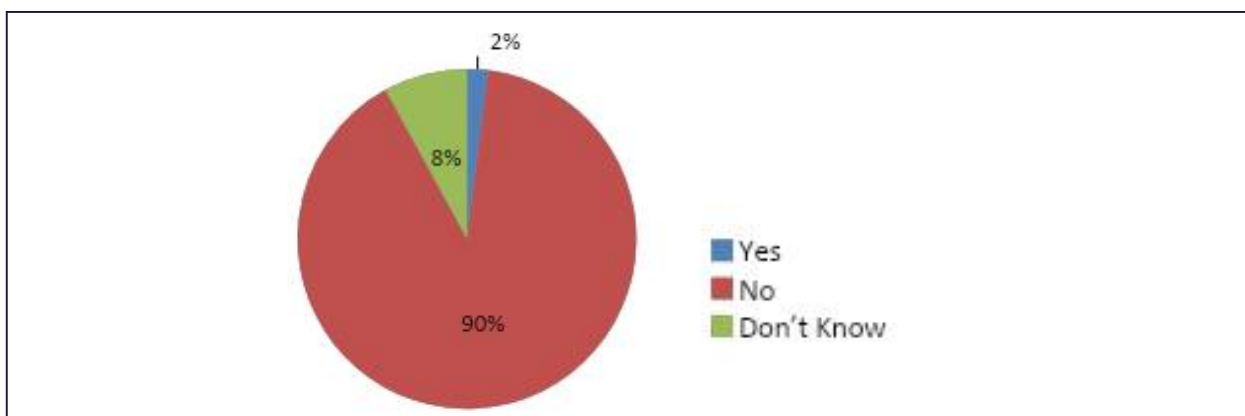


Figure 1

Q.2. Teaching and Learning of English in Madrasas can Negatively Impact the Socio-Cultural and Religious Identity of the Students

This statement is a bit similar to the previous one. Teaching of English was not just a linguistic and communicative venture rather a sociocultural and religious development to alter the cultural and religious identity of indigenous Indian population. Madrasas were particularly conscious of their religious identity and English language teaching and learning was taken as a move to deprive them of their religion and culture. Now, as the figure shows, Madrasas have undergone a cosmic shift and their thought pattern has significantly changed towards ELT practices.

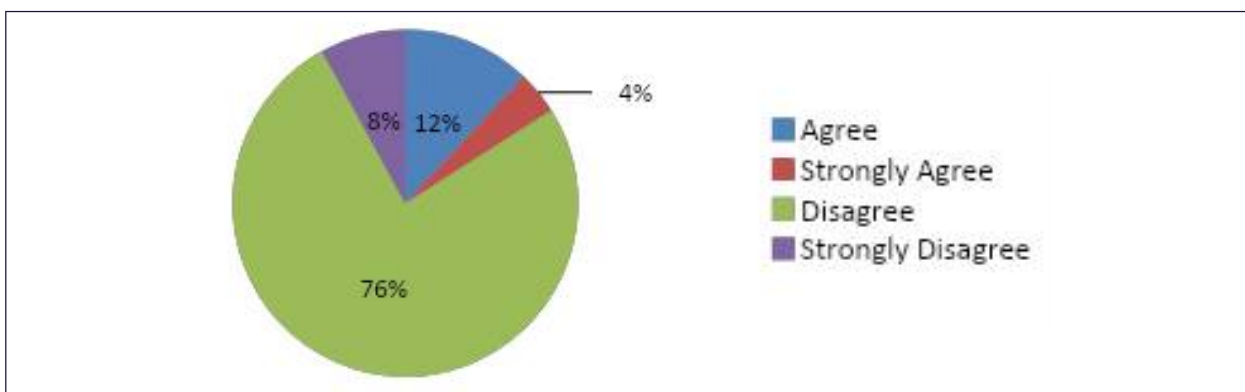


Figure 2

Q.3. Do you Believe in the Division of Knowledge between Deeni/Shar'ie (Religious) and Dunyawi/Ghair Shar'ie (Secular, Non-Religious)?

The division between Deeni (religious) concept of knowledge and Dunyawai (Worldly) concept of knowledge is so deeply rooted in Madrasa education system and the community at large that it creates two different world and ideological set-up within a single community. 67% of the English language teachers accept this division while 33% of them do not believe in this binary.

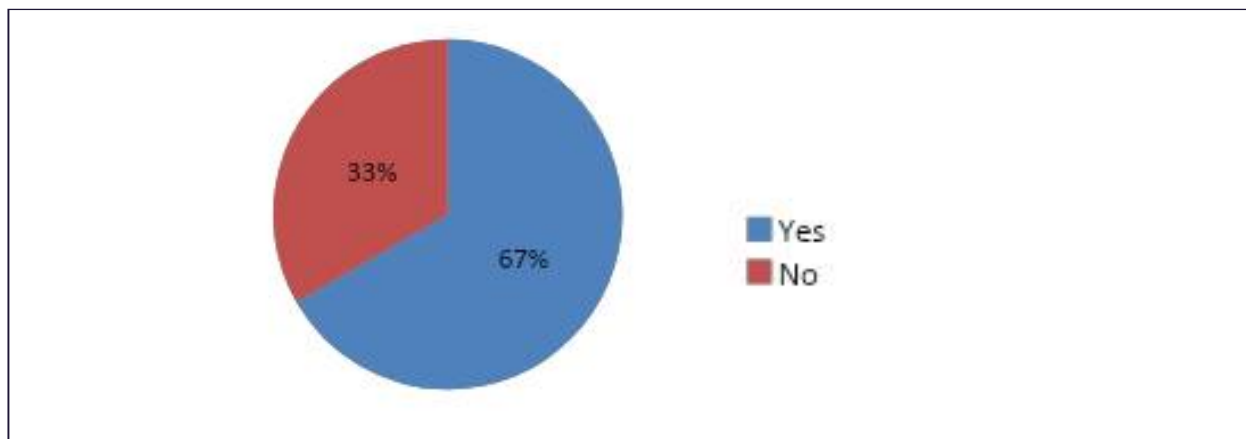


Figure 3

Q.4. Do you Believe that the Religious of Shar'ie Knowledge is the only System of True Knowledge?

This question had an intellectual touch and that's why the responses are more diversified. 60% of English language teachers of Madrasas accept that yes Religious or Shar'ie knowledge is the only system of true knowledge. This question lies at the heart of Madrasa education system and their priorities. 30% of them are not ready to accept the religious knowledge as the only system of true knowledge while 10% of the responses were not at either side of the binary.

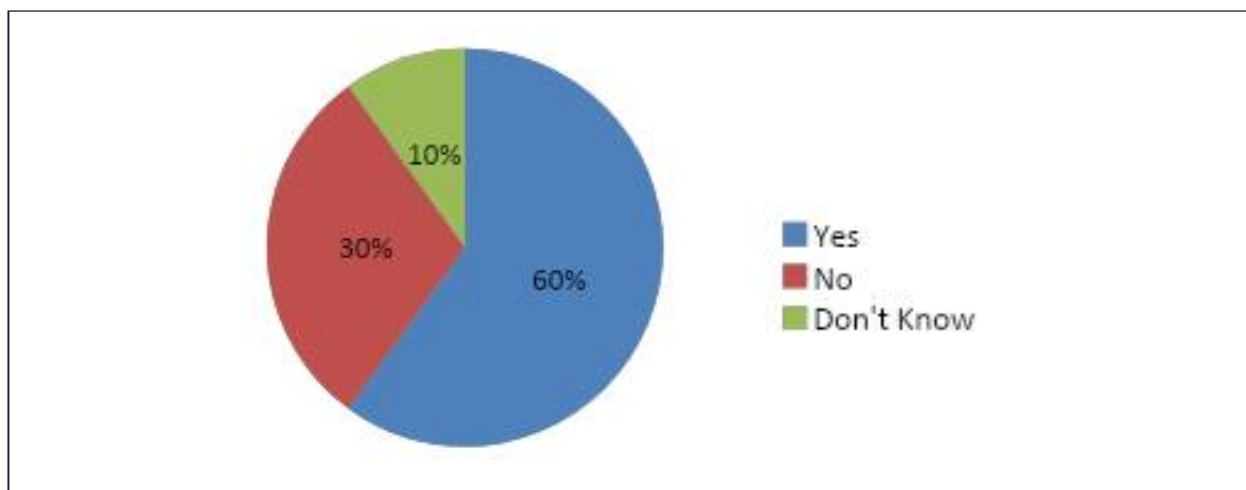


Figure 4

Q.5. In what Category does the English Language Teaching and Learning Fall, Traditional (Religious) or Modern (Non-Religious)?

This question has the potential to determine the motivation and practices of English language teachers. 70% of the responses consider English to be a modern subject and hence out of the Madrasa's overall learning priorities while 20% are not sure about this label put on English. It testifies the remains of older tradition of treating English a language of colonizers who were predominantly Christian with an aim to root out the religious and socio-cultural identity of its colonial subjects particularly Muslims.

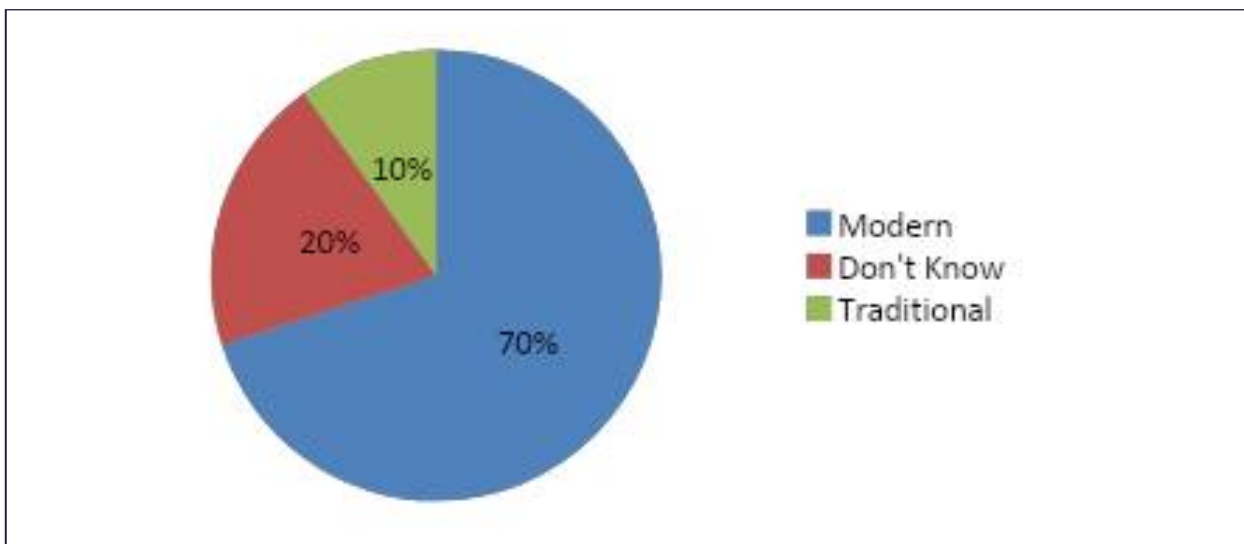


Figure 5

Q.6. Does your Perception of Knowledge Being Divided into Religious and Non-Religious Impact your Motivation and Practices of English Language Teaching?

Despite their strong believe in the binary of Shar’ie and Ghair Shar’ie as reflected in the above figures; this figure is somewhat against the expected response because if someone rests his/her belief in something that is absolute and true then there is hardly any way out of your inclination being vested in somewhere else. Above three questions and their responses conclude that English is not a subject of religious importance. It is a modern subject and hence not part of true system of knowledge that they believe in so how is it possible that your mental inclination doesn’t affect your motivation and bias in teaching English. A further discussion led the researchers to a somewhat distant interpretation of their responses. They accepted that yes they do subscribe to the religious idea of knowledge and English being out of the ambit but do not let their personal affiliations and inclination reflect in their teaching practices. They deny any kind of bias or prejudice towards English language teaching.

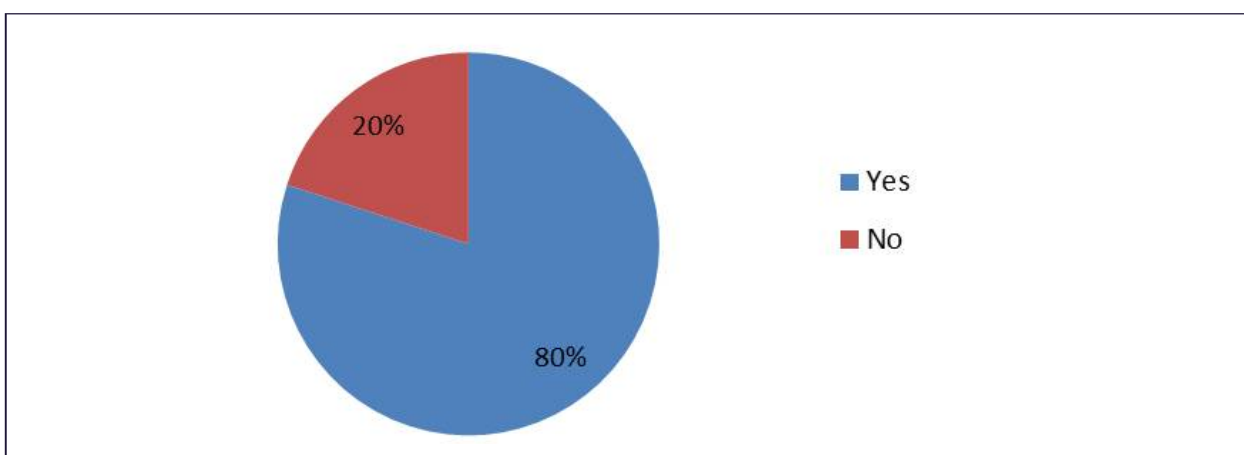


Figure 6

7. Questionnaire for the Students

Q.1. Teaching and learning of English language is against Islamic ethos and identity

As the Figure 7 shows, 90% of the responses elicited strongly disagree that English language teaching and learning is against Islamic values. This question gets its relevance from and is historically rooted back in colonial time as elaborated in the background of the study. When we trace the evolutionary history of English in India and people’s reaction to it, Muslims come to fore in opposing English language and culture. Teaching and learning English was taken antonyms to the Islamic thought and identity. Ulemas help built a separate chain of educational institutions to preserve this identity

and exclusively sidelined the teaching of English language. But now after the 75 years of independence the ice seems to be melting and it is evident from the responses that the researchers have collected from the students. As the Figure 7 shows 90% of Madrasa students strongly disagree that English language teaching and learning is against Islamic ethos and identity. Only 4% students think on the traditional lines drawn back during the freedom struggle movements. 6% students have milder tone of disagreement while the slot of strongly agree is empty.

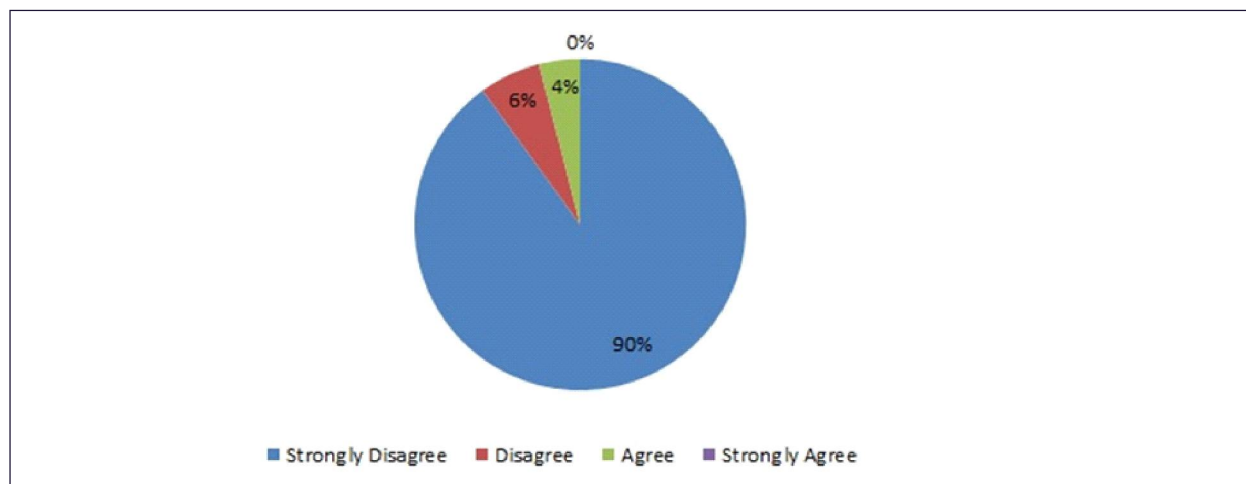


Figure 7

Q.2. What is your opinion regarding English language teaching and learning in Madrasas? Write in five lines.

This open ended question was intended to dig into their mind and get the opinion regarding ELT practices. Out of the 80 responses that the researchers have collected 76 of them are positive. Majority of them linked English language with socioeconomic and educational status of Muslims. For some, English is an international language a good command over which might open countless number of job as well as educational opportunities. For some students it was a matter of socio-cultural prestige and prerogative. The response of this question has broken the centuries old myth that Madrasas hate English education. After analyzing the diversity of positive responses, I have bifurcated the graph into positive and negative responses.

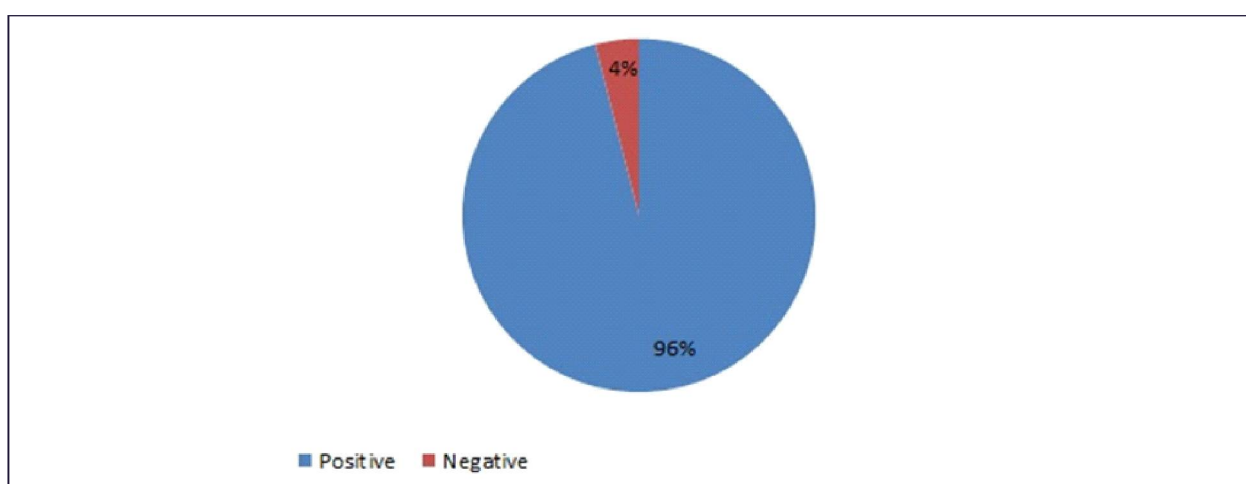


Figure 8

Q.3. Teaching and learning of English in Madrasas can negatively impact the socio-cultural and religious identity of the students.

The response of the English language teachers of the Madrasas to this question was more uniform than the Students' response. The percentage of disagreement of teachers was 76 while students' response takes sixty percent of the slot. 24% students strongly disagree with the statement while 12% students agreed with the motion. The percentage of the students who strongly agree is 4% of the total.

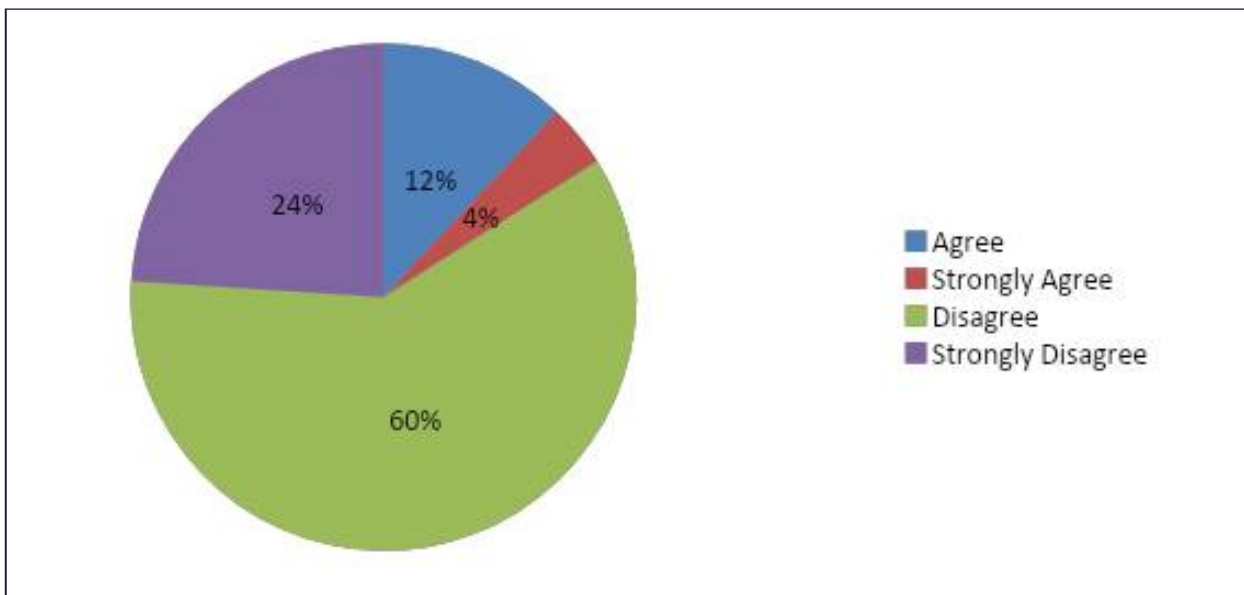


Figure 9

Q.4. Are you satisfied with the status and standard of ELT practices in Madrasas?

In response to this question as the Figure 10 shows 80% students said no while 20% students are satisfied with the quality and standard of ELT practices in Madrasa. A further discussion revealed that few Madrasas have incorporated English education in their curriculum and as a result ELT practices are satisfactory for its students. Like other subjects of religious importance taught with missionary zeal, English language is also equally treated and goes parallel to Arabic and Urdu languages.

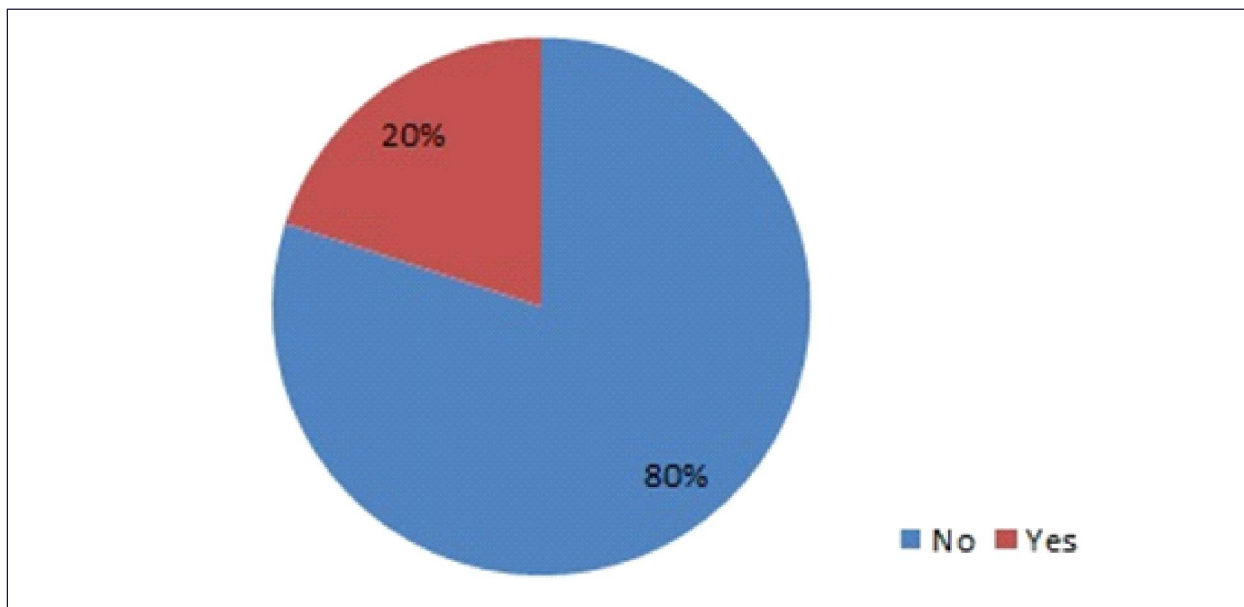


Figure 10

Q.5. Are you satisfied with the ELT practices at Bridge Course?

90% of the responses have chosen yes while the rest 10% have opted no. As already highlighted under the heading ‘Introduction of Bridge Course’ English language is at the core of the initiative and it has given a special attention to the ELT practices. Three classes covering various aspects of English language and communication are being conducted and holistic approach is adopted to facilitate the maximum and effective learning (Figure 11).

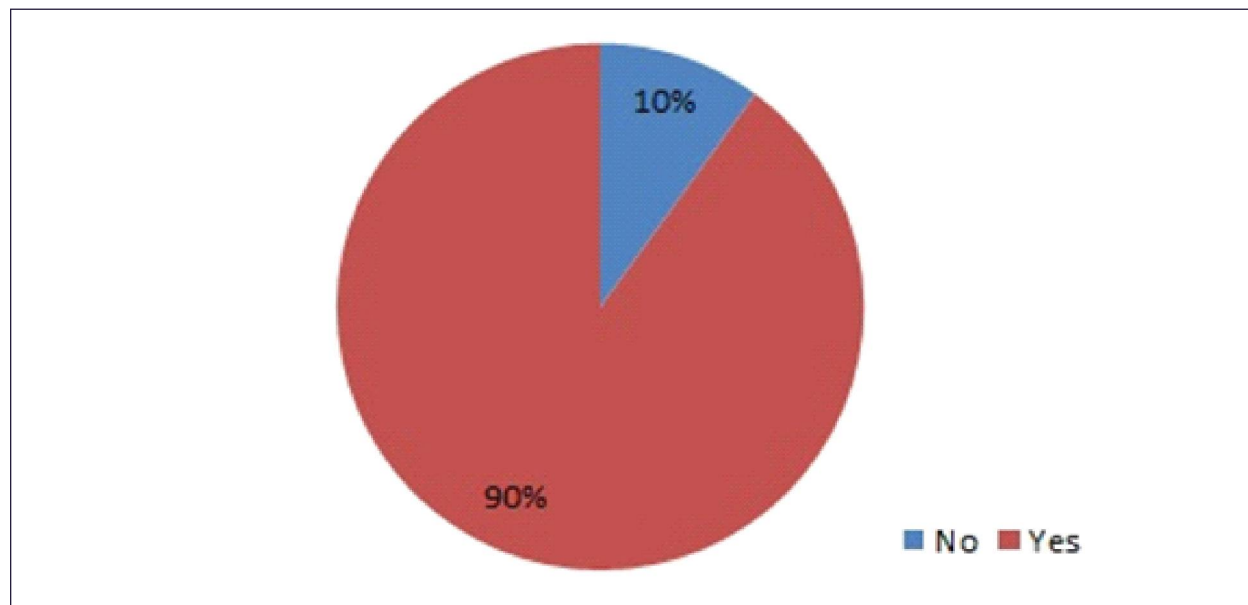


Figure 11

Q.6. Teaching and learning of English language help elevate the socio-economic and educational standards of Madrasa students.

As the Figure 12 illustrates, 92% of the students are certain in concluding that English language has the potential to uplift the socio-economic and educational standards. Majority of them cited their presence at Bridge Course to avail the bounty present in the name of English. This thumping response is not a challenge to the reality. English has now become a ‘lingua franca’ and serving as a language of global communication, scientific and technological advancements. People see privilege in being equipped with English education; seek more economic and educational. Educational institutions largely facilitate learning through English language considering it the main media of instruction and material.

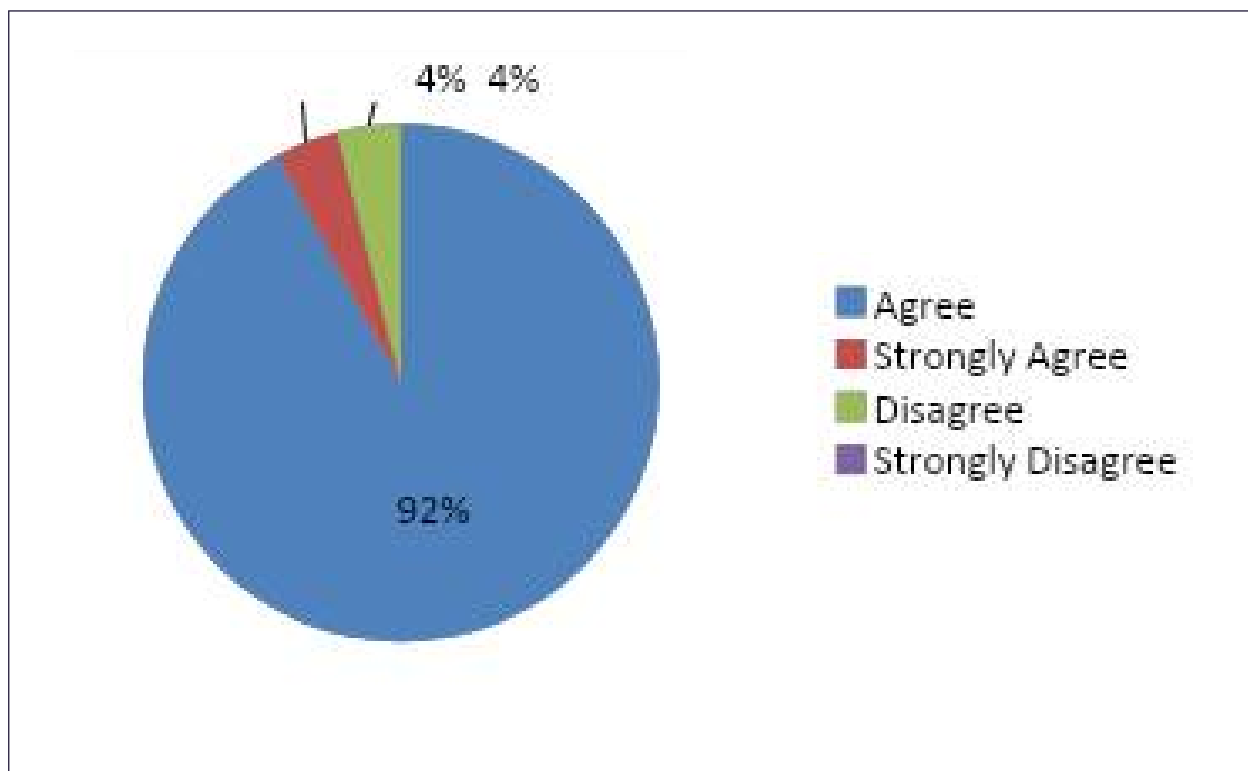
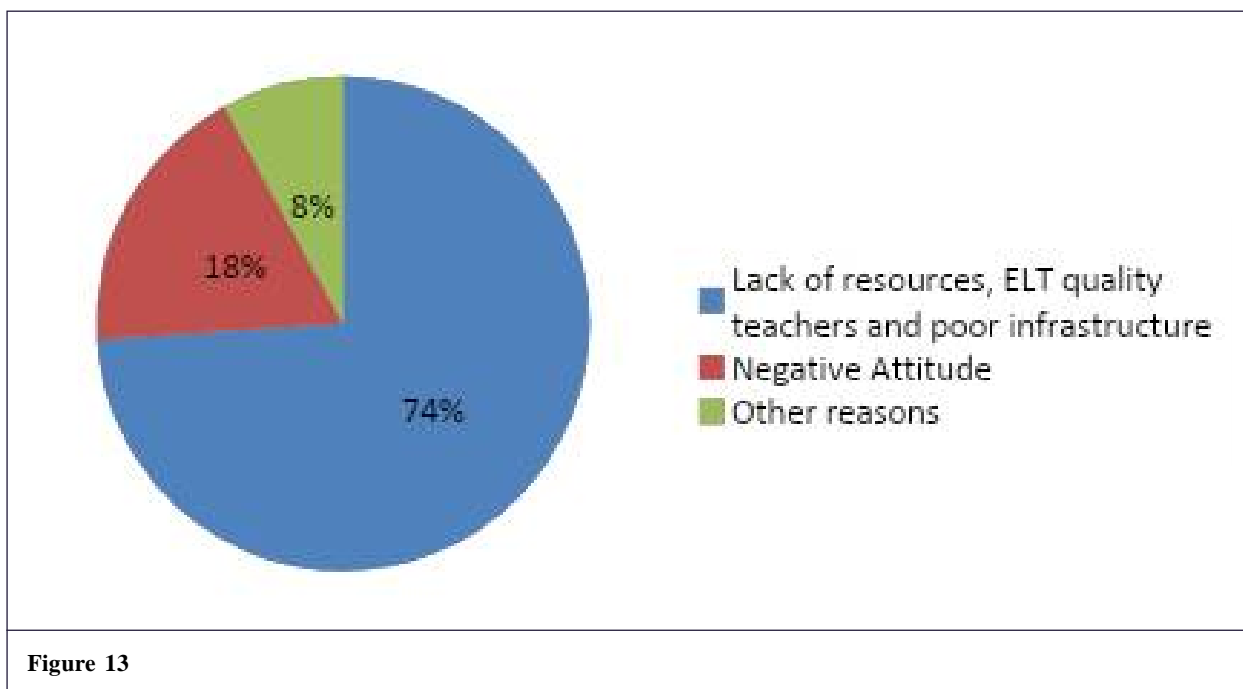


Figure 12

Q.7. What are the reasons/factors you would suggest responsible for ELT practices being poor in Madrasas? Write in 5 lines.

In response to this question as the Figure 13 shows 74% students resorted to the lack of resources, poor infrastructure and dearth of qualified English language teachers for the poor ELT practices. 18% students still think that Madrasa establishment has negative attitude towards English language. Their century old, pre-independent traditional attitude hasn't changed yet and that is the reason behind the poor management of ELT practices in Madrasa. 8% students cited other reasons for example curriculum load, incompatibility of English education with the goal and objectives of Madrasa education system. According to some students if Madrasas will teach good English, the drop -out and enrolment proportion of Madrasas will suffer and majority of the students will leave Madrasa education and enroll themselves in modern institutions, as a result of which Madrasa education system will totally collapse.



8. Findings and Recommendations

1. Centuries old antagonism towards English education especially English Language and literature is positively changing now. The new generation of Muslim youths like Madrasa students is willing to equip themselves with English language. English is no more an enemy's language.
2. English language teachers of Madrasas as well as students do not consider the teaching and learning of English language against Islamic ethos and values.
3. There is a gap between the need/demand of Madrasa students and will of Madrasa authorities. Despite strong will of students; madrasas seem reluctant towards English language education. They lack constructive and sincere efforts.
4. Experiments like Bridge Course can be stretched to a larger scale. Large scale implementation of such initiatives can help mainstreaming Madrasa education and attend modernization calls made by the Govt.
5. Madrasa students are basically multilingual. Arabic along with English can open the door for a countless number of job and academic opportunities and hence help uplifting the socio-economic and educational standards of the community.
6. Learning different languages especially English do not jeopardize their religious and socio-cultural identity rather it provides a bigger and more comprehensive canvas to their identities and affiliations.
7. English is an International language. Learning English can surely reap greater socio-economic and educational advantages. Madrasas should heed a serious attention towards the need and demands of the students specially their longing for English Language learning and teaching. It can positively help the community and provide greater access and opportunities towards an all-round development.

8. English language teachers in Madrasas believe in the binary of Deeni and Duniawi Taleem and also accept that the Deeni Taleem (religious education) is the only system of true knowledge.
9. They consider English a modern subject and hence not in the lines of the core objectives of Madrasa Education system.
10. Despite their belief in the binary of Deeni and Duniawi Taleem and also English being a modern subject it doesn't impact their ELT practices. Their motivation to teaching English doesn't go with the opinion they hold regarding the idea of true knowledge and scholarship.

9. Conclusion

ELT practices in Madrasas though marked by a poor condition; are improving gradually. On the pretext of modernization and reform calls; Madrasas are going through a considerable positive change. Along with other significant developments; ELT practices are also getting its due place in the curriculum. Myths and stereotypes once indispensable parts of Madrasa education system are waning with time. The perception of the students and the English language teachers towards English education has changed. English education is no more a threat to their religious and socio-cultural identity rather it has become a medium to elevate their educational and socioeconomic standards. Madrasa students are making their way in the mainstream education system. Literacy in English language is making their dream a reality. Initiatives like Bridge Course are acting as a buffer zone to connect young Ulemas with modern education.

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