

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

CIES Symposium – October 26-27, 2017

Hosted by:

George Mason University, Center for International Education
CIES Gender and Education Standing Committee
CIES South Asia Special Interest Group



Symposium statement: Decolonizing methodology by invoking local voices

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I will approach this discussion with a focus on the nature of resistance to global knowledge and research generated in the South Asian context as a response to colonization. I will provide examples from my experience with projects I am currently working on as well as my research and writings about contemporary challenges to madrasa education reform policies and practices in India. We see a lot of resistance to change in our countries, often backed by justifications of self-assertion and glorification of traditions. These must be addressed carefully.

We must consider a combination of factors that have led to the dominance of the colonizing west in publications and research within and about South Asia. One of the key factor is the dominance of English and the impact it has had on global scholarship. According to the German linguist Ranier Enrique Hamel, in 1880 there were 36% of scientific publications using English, which had risen to 64% by 19801. This trend has been further accentuated, and by 2000, among journals recognized by Journal Citation Reports, 96% were in English. This trend is reinforced even further as increasing numbers of courses in Europe and Asia are taught in English. Clearly, there has been a significant loss of knowledge, perspectives, voices, and future potential of non-English speaking scholars and researchers globally. For last two years, I have been working in the field of higher education in East Africa and observe the increasing pressures universities have of getting published in “internationally” recognized journals because of its influence on university rankings, which in turn affects funding and recruitment. Furthermore, having to publish in English impacts the quality and depth of writing and expression leading to poorly reviewed contributions. At the same time and as a response, there is a voice of resistance in higher education institutions in the region that refuses to participate in international rankings and refuses to publish in international journals, however, without alternative plans to form local networks of support and quality control.

When looking at the impacts of colonization on development practices, research, and education, it is just as important to look at the resistance it has generated, as the suppression it has caused. The history and evolution of many of these resistance efforts and movements is key to understanding the present context of research and learning, and associated policies and programs in the region. It is also important to note

¹ Pickles, M. (Jan 20, 2016). Could the dominance of English harm global scholarship? BBC News. <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-35282235>

that oftentimes, resistance that was progressive in the historical context of colonization may be severely counterproductive and retarding in the present context. Not all forms of resistance lead to reforms, and not all reforms are truly progressive. Hence, while contemplating on development research and methods in a post-colonial context, it is important to emphasize the need to cultivate the ability to critique the past and the present.

Let me draw from my research² to substantiate this argument. The educational purpose, organizational structure, and networking policies of madrassas in the region, I observed, have not yet overcome their historic response to colonization. The fear of external control and forced assimilation of Muslims into the dominant “other” culture and society seem to have continued from the colonial to the postcolonial stage. To several teachers and managers of independent madrassas (I interviewed), the State policy of madrasa modernization is not a radically new concern. They observed the policy as similar to the grants-in-aid system of the pre-independence era when the British agreed to offer financial support with certain stipulations to denominational institutions as long as they also offered “good secular education”. In rejecting such stipulations, a nationwide movement arose to revive madrassas as centers of educational revolt against British policies, in the process rejecting Western forms of knowledge and any possible engagement with the government. Enshrined in the foundational principles of Darul Uloom Deoband madrasa, the subcontinent’s most influential political and education movement, was an emphasis on keeping the madrasa funded only through informal public donations, so it could remain independent of any wealthy family and the British government. The common narrative from the perspective of the then reformist madrassas was that of continued efforts fighting the British and other Western influences in efforts to protect and preserve the sanctity of their institution. Madrassas today, with large numbers following their tradition of colonial perceptions of government, continue to resist collaborations with the government.

Many Muslim leaders and providers of education since Indian independence still shun Western forms of knowledge simply because of its association with British colonial power. In his psychological analysis of madrasa education and its history in UP, Washim Ahmad³ argues that “the historical and psychological processes that have gone into the making of these institutions are mostly the creations of reactionary nature”. He calls this state of mind among Islamic scholars an “attitude of exclusiveness” that further leads to “ghettoization” of madrassas and of the Muslim community. By rejecting all knowledge coming from the West, madrassas fell into the colonial trap of associating modernity with Western and traditional with Eastern. Scholars refused to teach and learn Western languages such as English and French. They stopped translating their own works in international languages. Before the British rule, madrassas in South Asia held international prestige in contributing to the fields of philosophy, law, reasoning, and even architecture – all that literature in Persian and Urdu rots in unpreserved libraries.

There is significant resistance from madrassas to comply with government’s recommendations for changes in curriculum despite incentives such as payment of salaries for teacher who will teach government-designed curriculum. From the madrasa point of view in India, the government’s vision of “modernization,” “upliftment of the backward communities” and “educational reform” is a policy for political control and identity conversion. The fact that Muslims constitute a minority in a Hindu majority

² Kidwai, H. (2015). *Postcolonial challenges to madrasa education reform in India: Bureaucracy, politics, resistance, and cooptation*. Doctoral Dissertation. Teachers College – Columbia University. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/openview/4351e68d5919e58b6f57739fd69c5e0f/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

³ Ahmad, W. (2000). Psychology of education: Madrasas of UP. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(13).

country with a history of interreligious tensions further reinforces these role perceptions. Hence, colonial patterns continue in terms of perceptions and expectations that entrench relationships of mistrust and aloofness, and an inevitable gap exists between official policy, unofficial interpretations, and resulting practices of madrasa education reform in India.

Today, Madrassas in South Asia are currently functioning under the pressure of multiple, competing expectations of survival and reform. Divided over their vision for the future, some align more towards their exclusive duty to preserve and teach religion, while others are coming to terms with market demands and changing their curricular emphasis to include more of the “worldly knowledges.”

Moving beyond madrassas to the very current education discourse in India I see that several educational reforms taking place are of reactionary nature. We have begun to see an uprising of another reactionary response from certain right-winged Hindu groups. Over-glorification of the ancient Indian past was a reaction to colonial rule that supported nationalist movements during the independence struggle. Today, those movements and their ideology is being reinterpreted to support a majoritarian political agenda in the country. Impact on research and educational institutions is becoming more and more evident as national reserves are being used to fund writings claiming ancient India’s knowledge of modern sciences (including having built rockets and airplanes in ancient times!)⁴. In trying to emphasize the glory of India's past, “the very nature of sciences and their logical simplicity are being undermined and destroyed by those who wish to claim that ancient Indians knew of a lot of modern science”⁵. People who advocate such ideas and encourage teachers to highlight this in the classroom without a shred of evidence are driving younger generation to a state of confusion and irrationality. Histories are being rewritten and ethics of research are being gravely compromised. The role of CIE, especially its chapters in South Asia, is becoming more relevant than ever.

Development organizations emphasize the need for evidence – with a clear preference for numbers on neatly categorized indicators. Inferences based on these numbers often inform policies and resource mobilization. While there is increasing realization of the relevance of context and the need for qualitative enquiry through participatory and reflexive research approaches, these are often judged with impatient and doubtful assumptions. The impact of this tendency has caused immense waste of resources, destruction of local ecologies, and resistance to state intervention. The CIE community has this responsibility of pervading international development agencies, government set ups, and civil society networks to fight the (colonialist and anti-colonialist) tendency of replicating solutions across contexts. The gap needs to be bridged from both ends. This includes arming local practitioners and researchers with greater adaptability, and encouraging them to be critical – as much of themselves as of the dominant Western view and practices.

⁴ Mandavilli, A. (Feb 3, 2016). India’s government is becoming increasingly antisience. *Scientific American*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/india-s-government-is-becoming-increasingly-antisience/>

⁵ Vahia, M. (Aug 16, 2017). March for science: Muddying research with myths and beliefs will raise an irrational, confused generation. *Firstpost*. Retrieved from <http://www.firstpost.com/living/march-for-science-muddying-research-with-myths-and-beliefs-will-raise-an-irrational-confused-generation-3936303.html>

CITATION:

Kidwai, H. (2017, October). Symposium statement. In CIES Symposium, *Decolonizing methodology by invoking local voices*. Conference Proceedings of the 2nd Comparative and International Education Symposium: Interrogating and Innovating CIE Research, George Mason University. Arlington, VA: GMU. Retrieved from: <https://cehd.gmu.edu/2017symposium/>

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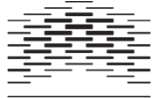


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