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Mosques As Centres Of Primary Education

The suggestion that mosques in villages should be utilised as centres of primary education has stirred some controversy which might soon explode into open social discontent. Those who favour the idea cite early Islamic history, and say that the first schools in Medina during the Prophet's time were located in mosques. They argue from this that there could be no doctrinal objection to the use of mosques for a dual purpose. But those who oppose the idea, and they have a large constituency, counter with the argument that conditions in Bangladesh are different, and warn that to permit schools to be located in mosques would turn them into battlegrounds between rival village factions and deprive the rural community of the only neutral place where friend and enemy could meet without flying at each other's throat. That needs careful weighing.

A second objection is that such a primary school is and should be open to all sections of the country regardless of their religious affiliations. A school as a mosque could mean non-Muslim children and staff entering a place which the Muslims consider holy and to which access is barred for non-Muslims in normal circumstances. No Muslim would want a mosque to be transformed even for limited period, into a place where noisy and possibly unclean children would leap about. That would amount to desecration in most Muslim eyes. If one group tolerated it, others would not and what with one thing or another we may soon have to deal with outbreaks of rioting over the use of mosques.

In most villages where there is a proper mosque with a trained imam, Muslim children receive their early grounding in religion from him, and that, critics of the proposal under discussion say, is as far as the community could go without demur. It would be unwise to introduce anything else into this tradition in pursuit of a goal which otherwise is admirable. If we are aiming at universal literacy, the safest course is to avoid methods which seem likely to plunge society into turmoil and frustrate the goal in view by a wrong choice of means. Caution in any matter concerning religion even the use of religious buildings, is urgently called for in a community whose emotional sensitivities are apt to be easily offended.