

My experience as a Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP) student

There are moments in life one forgets. There are moments which one remembers temporarily. But there are also moments which leave their mark on one's heart and mind for eternity. This is not something one has a control over; it just happens. Such moments just magically take you in their embrace. STEP is undoubtedly and inevitably one of such experiences.

In the last few months of Grade VI in my Religious Education Center (REC), my friends and I were often told about a new curriculum emerging at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London and about a change in the way of teaching for grade VII and onwards. A change for the good and a change I was privileged to experience, to be amongst the first batch of its students. The change that came about was called Secondary Teacher's Education Program (STEP), something that I didn't even know the full form of until I stepped into grade VII. But, we all were positive that it wouldn't let us down and it truly would be a change for the better, better than what we perceived of REC before, a change that would leave its mark deep in our minds, for us to cherish for the rest of our lives. The fact that teachers from London, specially trained for two years for this purpose, gave us the vibe that this program would be 'our road to Damascus-an experience that brought a revolution in the lives of its students

I still remember how excited I was about my first STEP class; I got ready an hour before the class and was the first student to enter the STEP room. The new appealing STEP classroom was just a preview of the amazing times we would experience here. However, STEP was much more than just a glamorous room with all the facilities in it - it brought great responsibility on the students as well, responsibility to not let *His Highness The Aga Khan* (the pioneer of this program and a visionary leader) down. It also provided an opportunity for us, as students, to prove our abilities and skills to our teachers, to our parents and also to ourselves. The program taught us to believe in ourselves and that every student in class matters to this world. The various fun-filled activity-based teaching methods helped us unravel the talents within us.

At different stages of the program, we were provoked to demonstrate our intellect through rationales and reflections. It was a driving force that encouraged us to realize our capabilities through different platforms such as group discussions, public speaking, debates and presentations. We interacted with our peers like never before and discovered specific areas that they excelled in. Some were good at writing, some were good at painting or drawing, some were good at speaking or expressing themselves. While making the utmost use of each and every child's talent, we presented our ideas to the class in unique ways every time. It was not about impressing the teacher that gave us happiness, but the fact that we managed to achieve something as a team was worth the happiness itself. We felt so proud of ourselves, boasting about this program to our school friends, making it sound glamorous and appealing. It filled us with a rejuvenating sense of elation and in accordance to the fact that just like the previous Ta'alim curriculum, it too was being universally followed gave us a feeling of unity within the broader Ismaili community

"On the wings of the world" in Grade VII was based on the collection of literary sources and quoted many of the famous Muslim writers who have inspired generations in history. Extracts from QadiNoman's *Daimul Islam*, Fariduddin Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, verses from the Holy Qur'an and even the *Nahaj-ul-Balagha* of His Highness The Aga Khan Ali (AH) were great studying material as perceived by the students. We learnt about different modes of figurative language in literature that included allegory, parables etc. Not only did we generally learn about them but our thought process was channeled into reflecting rationally on to each and every verse of the Quran; praising it's anecdote, unique style of writing and engaging in healthy debate as to what messages do those beautiful words hold in their custody This gave students an insight into another art: the art of interpretation. An art which isn't innate but learnt and utilized according to that particular person's mindset and the context that they are living in. To further clarify this, the perception of a Sunni Muslim and a Shia Muslim of the Quran might be completely different, however, not wrong. The point I am trying to make here is that the sole fact that the Qur'an is not in the form of straight forward rules shows God himself

encouraging the world to decipher his words and hence every interpretation is correct in its own way. Never before did we even keep our feet into this sea of discovery, hence, it was an important step towards taking God, his messages and His creations in dimensions we had never before. I remember that once my teacher helped me to see into the different interpretations of the *Ay'a-e-Nur* that made me realize the dimension of reading the Qur'an between the lines. This made me explore multiple interpretations of the Qur'an and engaged me in the struggle of deciphering its meaning on an individual basis.

The next year, a new batch of recently graduated teachers brought a completely different experience altogether. Following the ethics module this time, we learnt the difference between being modern and being western and the different aspects associated with it. I still remember the activity we did on the 'modernity cake', mixing various aspects of it to be an ideal person to adjust ourselves in this rapidly changing world. We talked about issues of multiple identities and how we situate ourselves as Ismailis in modern times. Later we talked about Ismaili Centers and how they serve the purpose of reflecting Ismaili identity while serving the purpose of a *jamatkhana* side by side. We discussed the AKDN and how its not-for-profit institutions serves mankind regardless of race, creed, gender, color or religion. We discussed how especially after the saddening event of 9/11, the need to redefine Islam and most importantly, reconstruct the image of Muslim *Ummah* arose.

Throughout grade IX and grade X, we studied about the early life of the Prophet (PBUH) and the Muslim dynasties that ruled after his death. I recall that the event of *Mairaj* was discussed from different point of views. It's not that we hadn't studied this before in school or even REC itself but the activities with whose assistance the message of it went par were so intriguing that we were often left spellbound! I perfectly remember the class on music conducted by one of our own local Ismaili guitarist where we talked about one of the most controversial topics putting up barriers between the so called liberal and conservatives of the Muslim Ummah; Music. We studied about various cultures in the Muslim Ummah who with the help of music only listen either to the Qur'anic verses or engage in the worship of Allah; a very famous example would be that of the *Marsiya* which the Shia Itnashari Muslims practice during Ashura. Analyzing so many communities who use music as a source of contentment in their religious as well as secular lives made us come to the idea that music after all isn't bad at all, but again everyone has their own school of thought and one must respect that at all times.

In our MSC (Muslim Societies and Civilizations) module, we went through the entire event of Gadir-e-Khum and this topic specially gave way to heated debates in our class. We analyzed this event from a *Sunni*, *Shia* and other historical perspectives, which honestly opened our horizons to different interpretations. We have discussed this event many a times in school but the sole fact that the schools have a mixture of Sunni as well as Shia Muslims made either the teacher or the students hesitate in engaging in "open" debate due to certain nitigrities and sensitivities related to such topics and even because of being fearful of the questions they might not have an appropriate response to justify their belief. In this regard, STEP has undoubtedly helped its students to become confident youth of their times and the times to come; to be the real ambassadors of Ismailism and His Highness the Aga Khan . We discussed the various ups and downs in the life of the four caliphs (*Khulfa-e-Rashidun*) and how their political stances and reforms affected or benefitted the people of that time. We explored the ways in which debates that took place in their times and how the governing methods employed are still relevant to our everyday lives. Furthermore, we studied various Muslim empires in history with the Umayyad dynasty being one of the most prominent. Going through their literary accomplishments (of satires, fables and *ghazals*) and their architectural accomplishments (Dome of the Rock, Umayyad Mosque, Desert Palaces) through various fun-filled activities was an amazing experience!

I believe that this curriculum was specially set up for the Ismaili students all over the world to not only get to know their faith in a better way but also uncover the centuries of ancient "Muslim" civilizations that is part of our Muslim heritage. It was set up to make us aware of our own history that I believe is not much known within the Ismaili community. At multiple occasions the curriculum made me proud of our Muslim history, literature, scripture and culture. It truly defines

who we are and where do our roots exist. According to me, that is what STEP aims to protect and make us proud of; our 'identity'.

I was lucky enough to get a chance to interact with international STEP students by taking part in a pen pal activity conducted by one of our STEP teachers. In this activity students from Karachi and Atlanta (USA) communicated through writing about their common issues. It was a mesmerizing experience because we realized what problems other students faced, being an Ismaili in USA and how these problems were different from the ones Ismailis are facing in Pakistan. A good example would be that of the event of 9/11. It made the lives of Muslims in USA difficult due to discrimination on the basis of their religious identity. In short, we learnt about the various contextual problems faced by Ismailis around the world. We found out that the kind of problems that the Muslims faced in America were harsher than those faced by the Pakistani Muslims. Probably, the main reason is the fact that Islam as a religion and the Muslims as a community are a minority there. They therefore had to face greater rioting against them being part of the community which supposedly caused such an economic and social draw back to the host population that are the American Christians and other minor communities. The Muslims there were made targets of street violence and neglect at school, the work place as well as the media and Muslims were soon being stigmatized as "terrorists." The Pakistani Muslims on the other hand since were a majority in Pakistan did feel the reactions of the UN and America itself but within the civilians, faced greater understanding and tolerance.

We further explored differences that dwelled in the broader Ismaili community itself and with the spirit of glorifying this diversity, we shared the culture that they had and that we had. It was surprising to know how even religious practices differed from culture to culture. At the same time, without forgetting our identity or offending our pen pal's culture, we were embraced by this new sense of ownership of our culture and we could not have felt more proud of it as the correspondence continued.

We also got project work opportunities during our STEP classes. One such project was the community service project, in grade VIII. It included junk collection and was an amazing experience where we learnt three R's - Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. In addition, we got to uncover the hidden cultures of historic Muslim cities like Samarqand, Istanbul, Cordoba and even Cairo through another project. We presented dances and role plays; we set up markets for the different cities, with each group giving something to learn to the other group. In every project we got a chance to interact with our friends like never before.

It's an often debated - what came first? The addict or the drug? Well if there wasn't a drug, a person wouldn't have the craving for it, hence he'd be far away from the title of an addict. However, if there wasn't an addict, a drug would merely be a plant or any ordinary power. This dilemma was exactly what I believe we, as students, were facing in, at least the first year of their step experience. We were so engrossed in projects and assignments that the passion we had for it was like a drug. We wanted more of it. Often we asked our teachers about upcoming assignments because it stood as a platform for us to demonstrate ourselves in a way we never had the chance to. I think that was probably the main difference between studying and learning. Without those projects we always felt something was missing and that feeling gladly got overcome sooner or later when another project used to get announced. One of the major things that I would miss about STEP is that teamwork; that spirit of working together, not against each other, not for each other but with each other.

Often STEP students are found comparing their secular education with that imparted at REC. You see, in schools, what has been seen is that the teachers are aiming more towards completing the syllabus and preparing the students for their upcoming exams. That element of learning is often suppressed by that of studying. On the other hand, in STEP, what our teachers undoubtedly aim to do, is prepare us for our future, for the tests that we would face in the outer world. It makes us go through experiences demanding the exhibition of our team work, loyalty, tolerance as well as risk taking ability all of which we would definitely apply in our futures. The distinction between school and REC had been made

pretty clear with the emergence of a curriculum such as STEP, and a curriculum I was honored to be a pioneer student of.

In the current and last year of my STEP experience, I look back to the past and I smile. STEP has given me a totally different identity. It has made me a better person and has developed different aspects of my personality. It has given me memories that I can cherish my entire life; memories that complete me and help me move on. I think it's a matter of love. The more you love a memory, the stronger and stranger it gets.

No one can ever understand the worth of something until they lose it. That's probably why I might never know how I'll feel after it's over. But I'm completely positive that, when I leave, I'll have a sense of accomplishment and contentment, because the journey hasn't ended, it has just begun. A journey to prove ourselves with what STEP taught us to the wider world.

One thing I can say about the STEP teachers, pretty confidently is that they do not teach, they inspire!!

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