

Question: As an educationist, what do you think is the essential purpose of education and do you think what we teach to our children in schools serves that purpose?

Education is not about cramming facts into young minds or training parrots to recite perfectly with eyes closed. Nor is it about learning certain exam techniques - which our O and A level students and their teachers have mastered brilliantly. The madrassas have their own concept of good education. But for me – a liberal Pakistani who is not afraid of being called one – the real goal is to produce well-informed, socially responsible, thoughtful, and civic-minded individuals. Education creates a thinking mind that can look at facts to see if they are actually true, and emphasizes the use of reason and observation to make decisions. An educated person should be able to entertain a thought even without accepting it, and thus to be able to make informed judgments. For all this it is necessary to expose students to the accumulated wealth of human experience and knowledge.

Do we do that in Pakistan? Absolutely not! We teach students about Pakistan's enemies and about jihad. Everything starts and stops with Islam without even a nod towards the wonderful diversity of this country's religions, languages, and cultures. There's absolutely nothing in school books about throwing litter on the streets, preserving the environment, obeying traffic rules, paying taxes, or respecting the rights of your fellow citizens. Instead the entire emphasis is on ritual, tradition, and blind submission to authority. It is precisely this horrific mis-education – not lack of educational facilities or insufficient schools – that explains why Pakistani society has become so exceptionally violent, brutal, and intolerant. We'd be much better off without this kind of education.

Question: From back in 1984, when you and A.H. Nayyar examined the history textbooks of Pakistan for the Air Marshal Asghar Khan's book *Islam, Politics and the State*, how have you seen this ideologically-driven curriculum impact successive generations?

How can one not notice? It stares you in the face. Having taught at Pakistani universities for forty years, I have seen that students coming from our high schools have poorer and poorer reading and writing skills. They know very little mathematics, are incapable of coherently articulating an argument, and most have no sense of politics or history. They are the products of schools that are factories for mass-producing ignorance and mental retardation. The Pakistani student today is deficient in basic skills and knowledge both in relation to the past, and compares poorly with students from India, Iran, and Bangladesh. Although some super-elite A and O levels schools have developed the knack of getting high grades for their students, this merely shows that they are good exam-preparation institutes.

Religious policing is largely responsible for Pakistan's intellectual desertification and our rapid transformation into another intellectually sterile Saudi Arabia. There are hardly any high schools left where vital elements of learning such as drama, theatre, and musical events are encouraged – or even allowed. Coeducation even at the primary and middle-school level is disappearing, leading to an unhealthy and bizarre behaviour of male and female students when they enter universities and, of course, professional life.

Question: What is it exactly that stops us in Pakistan from changing the curriculum and making it more sensitive to religious diversity and less prone to militancy, violence, bigotry and distortion of history etc? Is it the lack of political will or is the political class plain helpless?

We Pakistanis suffer from a deep feeling of insecurity, and fear the truth might become too widely known. To cover up we teach our students lie after lie, instilling paranoia and xenophobia. We do not discuss the loss of half of Pakistan because that might endanger the holy Two-Nation Theory, we refuse to teach comparative religions because that might establish other religions as legitimate systems of belief, and we vilify all who are different from us. The result: the horrific recent slaughter at the Peshawar church, Alamdar Road, and countless bombings remain unprotested by all except a

tiny sliver of the population. We have lost our humanity – and this is squarely a consequence of the hate-filled, mind-warping poisons injected into young minds through their schools.

Question: Where do you think does the fault lie — in the making of the education policy, the making of the curricula or the textbooks? Who decides the content of the textbooks?

You see that most clearly in KPK, where a Taliban sympathizer now heads the government. He plans to re-inject violence, virulence, and aggression into the new textbooks just months after taking over. These hate materials had been partially removed in 2006 by the ANP government. The ideologically bankrupt PTI leadership has succumbed to pressure from its ally and partner, the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The religious organizations are often helped by their ideological allies, the bureaucrats of various education ministries. I found this out 10-15 years ago when I was a member of a government-appointed federal education reform committee. Our committee's numerous proposals for reforming school education were either opposed, ignored, or mutilated out of recognition. Minutes of meetings were frequently changed, twisted around, and manipulated as seen fit. Not surprisingly what emerged at the end of several months were mere platitudes. Add to this that the English used was so poor that one had difficulty in deciphering the minutes. For example I invite anyone to explain to me the following recommendation: “females must be oriented for mental health”!

Question: Some people are of the view that multiple education systems and not a uniform system is the answer. But in one recent case we have seen that one private school system was shamed on the media for trying to have a more inclusive approach. What is the potential of private education system in bringing about a positive change?

Yes, I saw that shameful blackmailing of a progressive school that had tried to teach comparative religions. That semi-literate, bigoted anchor should be taken to court for lying through his teeth. Paradoxically he sends his kids to an "O" or "A" level school because he does not want them to be indigenized in a madrassa – and then probably wants them to go to America for university education. Of course, such people scream about the burqa ban in France and the Swiss minarets – but that is the typical hypocrisy of our times. In Pakistani society all crimes, no matter how heinous, are tolerated as long as one can shout loudly enough that Islam is in danger. As for privatizing education: this is absolutely no solution because most private schools are ones that are run by religious organizations or groups with their own private agendas. Often these are very sectarian ones – the very ones that are tearing our society apart.

Question: Even if, hypothetically speaking, the curriculum is changed for the better, how will the mindset of the teacher be changed who is a product of the same system and gets shaped by other influences like the media? Do you have any suggestions for that?

I have no suggestions. The mindset of our teachers is no different from that of a street person. He or she merely transmits onwards the currently held values and beliefs, and is not any more or less enlightened. Education will change when values and beliefs change across the board. The task is immense and only time will tell if this can happen or not. For now it seems that we have decided to chase out or physically eliminate all religious minorities. That's the first stage. Later, we will become yet another Muslim country destroyed by civil war between Muslim factions each claiming to represent the true Islam. Look across the length and breadth of the Middle East and come to your own conclusions.

*\*\*\*Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy teaches physics and mathematics in Lahore and Islamabad\*\*\**