

MASS-PRODUCING IGNORANCE

by

Pervez Hoodbhoy

(for Prospect Magazine)

For three straight days in mid-October, screaming Punjabi and Pakhtoon students fought a pitched battle at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad. With sticks, stones, pistols, and automatic weapons they hammered away. From my end of campus I could hear bursts of Kalashnikov fire. Then, on the 4th day, one student died of gunshot wounds and the university closed down. Although classes resumed 3 weeks later, fear of revenge killings continues to stalk the campus. This last murder was the 4th this year at Pakistan's supposedly most prestigious public-sector university.

It should come as no surprise that Pakistan's public universities are so prone to blood-letting. Even the "big names" – Punjab, Karachi, QAU – are populated by feuding tribes of students. The tribalism is not new but it was greatly accentuated by the banning of student unions over 15 years ago on grounds they brought national politics into educational institutions. Today the only student representation permitted is through ethnic and religious groups. Their hate-filled propaganda succeeds in rallying together the violent *lumpen* element.

Religious vigilantes are adding to intellectual desertification. On their orders, drama, theatre, and musical events are forbidden, as is any activity that can bring male and female students together. In Punjab University, which is effectively run by the Jamaat-e-Islami, males and females must sit in separate sections of the classroom. A fanatical student mob ransacked the Department of Visual Studies of Karachi University earlier this week, destroying musical instruments, sculptures and paintings. Religious piety is all-pervasive and evident in the burqas and beards that dominate campuses across the country. The "azan" is regularly given, even during class times, inside departments. Student activists from universities rove the streets in Peshawar and Lahore, throwing paint on billboards showing women's faces. Posters on stair-walls in my department instruct one about the proper prayer to use while ascending or descending.

Violence and ethnic conflict are just one manifestation of a deeper and more disturbing reality. Pakistan's public universities are utterly barren. Apart from an occasional event, there are no seminars, colloquia, public lectures, debates, or open discussions of contemporary scientific, cultural, or political issues. Consequently campuses serve as breeding grounds for the mass-production of "*lumpen*" graduates. Ignorant and uncurious, with poor reading and writing skills, incapable of coherently articulating an argument, with little sense of politics or history, this kind of student exhibits few of the qualities that one associates with a university education.

Contrary to what is generally held to be true, the intellectual impoverishment of Pakistan's universities has very little to do with inadequacy of resources, and very much to do with inappropriate values and attitudes. And here the primary fault lies with the teachers rather than the students. With some honourable exceptions, teachers at public universities care little about the subjects they teach, freely conveying their confusion and ignorance to students. Many teachers admit that they never consult a textbook and choose to dictate from notes they saved

from the time when they were students in that same department. Questions in class are usually frowned upon, treated as an affront to authority. Promotions are time-bound and automatic.

It is absurd to think that paucity of resources lies behind the decline of the intellect in Pakistan or, for that matter, in the Islamic world. Consider mathematics and theoretical physics. The resources needed to develop these are next to zero. Nevertheless they are recognized as hardest and most rigorous disciplines to master in intellectual terms. Together they constitute the foundation of all science, the firm bedrock of scientific inquiry. Tragically, today there is not even one Pakistani under 50 years of age, living in Pakistan, who has any degree of international recognition as a mathematician or theoretical physicist. But 30 years ago, when I started teaching at Quaid-e-Azam University, one could have counted up to 20 names across the country. This is just one indication of the fantastic decline in intellectual capabilities in Pakistan across the board.

A myriad reminders of this decline confront me every day. For example, this afternoon, walking to my office in the university's physics department, I passed by a group of young burqa-clad women students. They were softly chanting together, with only eyes visible from behind their black shrouds. This was, however, not a religious "dars". Rather, they were cramming physics formulae for a forthcoming exam. Pakistan's new generation of science students has been brought up to be unquestioningly obedient, uncritically respect authority, and efficiently memorize and reproduce. Many students write the magical inscription "786" on their exam sheets in the hope of securing better grades, others spend long hours praying before examinations.

Enter Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman, appointed by General Pervez Musharraf as chairman of the Higher Education Commission, charged with reforming education. Here is a man of considerable brilliance, dynamism, and evident sincerity. Most importantly, he has billions in cash. In consequence many university departments are today awash in research funds and special incentives have been announced for Ph.D students and their supervisors. An optional tenure-track scheme for rewarding high-performing faculty has been announced, while 300 foreign faculty members are to be hired on contract at international-scale salaries. Thirty years ago, Atta's schemes could have worked wonders. But the rot is now so much deeper that the outcome of any technical fix, however clever and well-intentioned, is far from certain. Pakistan's violent international image drives away foreigners who may otherwise want to live in Pakistan and help transform its universities; the still dwindling number of Pakistani faculty members who can properly guide Ph.D research is now miniscule; students registered for Ph.D research (and often their supervisors!) are shockingly deficient in their basics; and private universities are tearing away the remaining good faculty from public universities.

For decades one has heard of grand plans to build MITs and Harvards in Pakistan, or at least something close to the many Indian Institutes of Technology. But these have come to naught because they failed to realize what is utterly basic – good universities are self-governing communities of scholars engaged in free inquiry, discovery, and transmission of knowledge. Such institutions can grow only if personal freedom and liberty are valued and respected, if the urge to innovate and experiment is rewarded rather than punished, and when a society looks towards the future rather than the distant past. Universities lie at the heart of modern civilization,

the secret behind its awesome strength. Pakistan has yet to get its first real university. Building nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, and having generals run the country, is no substitute.

The author teaches physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.