

Schools Or Zealot Factories?

by
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The continuing survival of the outspoken TFT is a minor miracle given the temper of our times. It is an act of courage to publish this weekly from within the heart of a society that has become progressively more violent, intolerant, and dominated by fierce fanatical forces. Bravo TFT! But will you survive the next 15 years too? As Pakistan's school-children turn into fiery zealots, will the forthcoming generation be able to stomach your forthright critiques?

The issue of Pakistan's poisonous education curriculum is scarcely new. Recent street rampages by religious forces in support of continuing the teaching of jihad in schools has underscored the difficulty of change. Feeling the heat, General Musharraf's minister of education, Zubaida Jalal, promptly declared herself a fundamentalist and announced that school textbooks without Quranic verses on jihad are incomplete. Prime Minister Jamali went yet further and declared that the "ideology of Pakistan" was "the most important thing that students need to learn".

Those familiar with Pakistan's education landscape are surprised that General Musharraf's so-called education reforms, and his minister of education, continue to earn high praise from George W. Bush, Colin Powell, and Condoleeza Rice (who recently described Ms. Jalal as a "wonderful woman"). This may come from naïveté and an abysmal ignorance of facts. More likely, this is a desperate and mindless bid to prevent Pakistan from becoming the incubator of international terrorism. Thus, over the last two years, the US has led Britain and the EU into pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into Pakistani schools, teacher training, and infrastructural needs. But they might as well try to douse a fire with gasoline.

Nearly a quarter century ago a cultural DNA molecule was crafted by General Zia-ul-Haq. This biological weapon was designed to replicate itself endlessly and produce young clones perpetually poised for war, and fuelled with passion for jihad and martyrdom. Children were to be told about heinous conspiracies against Islam and Pakistan, to hate Hindus and non-Muslims, and have the desperation of the besieged. They would be tasked with "collecting pictures of policemen, soldiers, and National Guards", understand that the exercise of democracy was why East Pakistan had separated from West Pakistan, and that the "Ideology of Pakistan" stood for zero tolerance of dissent and diversity. A second imperative: Obey, don't ask! This demand for intellectual docility and unquestioning obedience was a corollary to the first goal, with damning consequences for science education.

This DNA was injected by General Zia's ministry of education in late 1981, which routed it through its Curriculum Wing into embryonic minds all over the country. It was even more lethal than its creators could have imagined. School children chanted war songs, learned to spew venom, and venerated atom bombs. Militant jihad became part of the culture on college and university campuses. Armed groups flourished, set up offices

throughout the country, collected funds on Friday prayers, and declared a war without borders. But it was little realized that adult tigers behave differently from baby tigers, and that blowback was inevitable. Over time the Afghan-Soviet jihad metamorphosed into the Kashmir jihad, from there to the jihad of Sunnis against Shias and the jihad of Shias against Sunnis. But it really hit home when Pakistan's betrayed post-911 Islamists and rebellious Frontier tribesmen began their jihad against the original promoters and organizers of armed jihad – the Pakistan Army, in cooperation with Ronald Reagan's America.

For over two decades many in Pakistan had written and spoken about the consequences of creating a culture of militancy. But it splashed off like water from a duck's back. Even September 11 – which led to Pakistan's abrupt desertion of the Taliban and the slackening of the Kashmir jihad – made little difference to the world of the Pakistani schoolchild. General Musharaf's educational curriculum was a copy of General Zia's, faithfully transmitted onwards by the governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. Fearful of taking on powerful religious forces, every reigning government refused to take a position on the curriculum and quietly allowed future minds to be molded by fanatics. What might happen a generation later was a secondary matter for a government challenged on many sides. Thus, over a quarter century, powerful poisons remained potent.

What are the likely consequences upon Pakistan's future of continuing with the present curriculum (which Ms. Jalal proudly declares as having made yet more jihadist)? Two decades of experience suggest possible answers.

First, the citizen of the future will be an even more embittered, conspiracy-ridden, fearful, and traumatized individual. Pakistan's education gives a joyless future, one which offers little hope of peace and contentment. Instead, the child must battle invisible enemies because under every stone lurks a venomous snake. Besieged by sinister forces, he must learn to identify and then crush them.

Second, there can be little progress towards creating a modern state without a well-educated, scientifically literate, and technologically accomplished populace. It is impossible to do science with a medieval mindset, impossible to create functioning institutions when torn by sectarian conflicts, and impossible to effectively participate in today's globalized knowledge-based economy and culture when the only activity is to endlessly boast of glories long past. Not surprisingly, democracy also steadfastly refuses to grow roots in Pakistan. The distance between India and Pakistan – already huge – threatens to grow even more.

Supporters of jihad-in-education, particularly in the Urdu language press, allege that critics are manipulated by NGOs seeking to defame Pakistan. But this is merely a diversionary tactic. Even a quick browse through any bookstore reveals officially prescribed school books that have page after page filled with vile materials preaching hate, militarism, and intolerance. For those disinclined to spend their money or time in

searching for them, a useful compendium may be found on the following website: <www.sdpi.org>.

What lies ahead is rather apparent. One need but open one's eyes to today's realities. Religious vigilantes have led to intellectually desertified campuses. 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. Fanatical student mobs destroy 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.

The long road to education reform in Pakistan must begin with dissolving the Curriculum Wing of the federal ministry of education. A moronic, incompetent, self-obsessed, corrupt, and ideologically charged education bureaucracy today squarely blocks every attempt at real improvement. Most decision making bureaucrats cannot write a single straight sentence or argue a point coherently. They are both the victims and perpetrators of a system gone awry.

The work of the CW could be entrusted to some of the country's universities. This would scarcely be extraordinary. For example in Britain, universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, and London, define the curricula for school-leaving examinations. There are numerous other models: in the United States, every school is free to have its own curricula but college entrance examinations (the Scholastic Aptitude Test) enforce learning standards. India and Iran also have no national curriculum. These countries are proof that a country need not fall into pieces without one; surely Pakistan can survive without the CW.

But the problem is deeper than the existence of the CW. The truth provokes fear – I well remember a former vice-chancellor of my university privately defend indoctrination and false information in textbooks by arguing that if we tell the truth, Pakistani children will question the very existence of Pakistan. More recently, a resolution moved in the Pakistan Philosophical Congress against propaganda and indoctrination in textbooks was soundly defeated – apparently our philosophers too believe that telling the truth is dangerous. But without coming to terms with the Partition, East Pakistan, Ojhri Camp, or Kargil, Pakistan will be haunted in perpetuity by demons of the past. Nations that lie to themselves can never be secure. And, without acknowledging that others have done better than us, there can be no real understanding of the way out.

It is a myth that Pakistan's problem is illiteracy or lack of schools and money. On the contrary, it is excess of miseducation and the unconscionable manipulation of young minds that makes Pakistan dangerous to its own people and the world.

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