

## **Pluralism And Qazi Husain**

by

Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy

*The following article, published in June in Dawn (Pakistan), was in response to a strong article by the head of one of the most powerful and intolerant religious-political parties, published a few days earlier in Dawn.*

In summer 2001, while visiting the University of Maryland, I went to hear Qazi Husain Ahmad, emir of the Jamaat-i-Islami, lecture at the Brookings Institute in Washington DC. He spoke on Islam, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. What I heard both surprised and impressed me. Much of what Qazi Husain said was more or less along expected lines – Islam being misunderstood in the West, unfair US embargoes upon Pakistan after the nuclear tests, the unwarranted hostility towards the Taliban (although he disagreed with their rejection of education of girls), etc. But the rest was refreshingly new and remarkably enlightened.

In his opening remarks Qazi Husain praised the US for being a “pluralist” society where he could go to a mosque and freely proselytize, pointed proudly to his shalwar-kameez and declared he could dress as he pleased, and remarked that those of his family members who had migrated to the US felt quite at home. I had never heard him speak publicly in English earlier, nor had I expected such a sound appreciation from him of “pluralism” (a word that he repeated at least twice). In essence he had anticipated General Musharraf’s celebrated “enlightened moderation” by three years. His acceptance of the fact that different groups within a society could accept a plurality of beliefs and philosophies, and still live in harmony, was welcomed by all. I left with a new respect for his values and skills, as did many others in the audience.

It therefore saddened me to read Qazi Husain’s article in Dawn (10 June) wherein he espouses values that stand diametrically opposed to those he declared at Brookings. This article apparently negates his former stand on pluralism and tolerance. Instead, he now adopts a menacing tone towards Ismailis, referring to them thrice as a “religious minority” without conceding that they are a Muslim sect. He darkly hints that they may meet the fate of the Ahmadis in Pakistan, and claims that there are deep conspiracies to undermine Pakistan by attempting to change the school curriculum “by taking over the country’s education boards”.

It is important to put the record straight on the education issue, especially since this has become such an important issue recently. The fact is that none of Pakistan’s 24 examination boards (referred to as “education boards” by Qazi Husain) is authorized to change the national curriculum. The Aga Khan board, if and when it becomes fully functional, will also fall in the category of the other boards in this respect and will be required by law to teach only those materials approved by the government. Thus Qazi Husain’s claims are unsupportable. Indeed, by an act of parliament passed in the mid-1970’s, only the Curriculum Wing of the Ministry of Education can prescribe what can

be taught in Pakistan's schools. The spirit behind the legislation was to create a Pakistan that would stay together in spite of its religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity.

What happened, tragically, was very different. Under General Zia-ul-Haq, with full support from Islamic parties, ideologically charged individuals hijacked the Curriculum Wing. Over the years, they steadily converted Pakistani schools into zealot factories. Children were taught that heinous conspiracies explain the plight of Islam and Pakistan today, told to hate Hindus and non-Muslims, and have the desperation of the besieged. The curriculum required students to "collect pictures of policemen, soldiers, and National Guards", explained to them that the exercise of democracy was why East Pakistan had separated from West Pakistan, and gave them the notion that the "Ideology of Pakistan" stood for zero tolerance of dissent and diversity.

In contrast with the relatively open-minded education during Pakistan's earlier years, schools bred ignorance and violence. Militant jihad became part of the culture on college and university campuses. Armed groups flourished, set up offices throughout the country, collected funds after Friday prayers, and declared a war without borders. 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. Ultimately the sponsors of jihad – the Pakistani state and the army – fell victim to their own success. The attempts on the lives of top army commanders, suicide bombers, the violence in the Northern Areas over the issue of curriculum, and the Wana debacle, eventually convinced at least some people in the establishment that the time for change has come.

To forestall that possibility, the MMA organized street rampages to ensure that General Zia's curriculum would not disappear. Feeling the heat, General Musharraf's minister of education, Zubaida Jalal, promptly declared herself a fundamentalist. Under pressure, the government has now withdrawn every little piece of moderation and good sense that had somehow crept into the curriculum.

Although MMA leaders are free to declare this as a minor victory, and a demonstrative example of how street power can make a weak government bend, one still hopes that they will look at the broader interests of the country. If Qazi Husain thinks that pluralism in the US is a good thing, then by extension it should also be a good thing for Pakistan. Teaching hatred and lies to the nation's children can only result in its future citizens being embittered, conspiracy-ridden, fearful, and traumatized.

Although I agree with Qazi Husain's point that educating Pakistan's children should be our responsibility rather than that of the West, he appears rather dismissive about Pakistan's educational backwardness and the need for modernization. The only thing he appears to see is foreign donors frantically pumping money into the education sector for their "nefarious" ends. Whatever one may think of foreign aid, there can be little progress towards creating a modern Pakistan 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. Not surprisingly, democracy steadfastly refuses to grow roots in Pakistan. The distance between India and Pakistan – already huge – threatens to grow even more.

Finally, I cannot see why Qazi Husain chose to bring US foreign policy and Abu Ghraib into his article. This is not even a matter of debate – every person in Pakistan is deeply critical of American aggression in Iraq and Palestine. For that matter, the majority of people on this planet loathe George Bush’s mad imperialism. But this does not mean that they want to opt for religious tyrannies. Indeed, the people of India booted out the BJP precisely for this reason. If Qazi Husain wishes for a prosperous and peaceful Pakistan – a country to which one’s relatives might wish to immigrate into rather than emigrate out of – then he, better than anyone else, knows that pluralism and multiculturalism has to be the way.

*The author teaches at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad and is the editor of “Education And The State – Fifty Years of Pakistan”, published by Oxford University Press in 1997.*