

## THE SAUDI-IZATION OF PAKISTAN

*Why Pakistan is changing and what this means for South Asia and the world*

by

Pervez Hoodbhoy

For three decades, deep tectonic forces have been silently tearing Pakistan away from the Indian subcontinent and driving it towards the Arabian peninsula. This continental drift is not physical but cultural, driven by a belief that Pakistan must exchange its South Asian identity for an Arab-Muslim one. Grain by grain, the desert sands of Saudi Arabia are replacing the rich soil that had nurtured Muslim culture in India for a thousand years. A stern, unyielding version of Islam – Wahabism – is replacing the kinder, gentler Islam of the sufis and saints who walked on this land for hundreds of years.

This change is by design. Twenty five years ago the Pakistani state pushed Islam on to its people. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, floggings were carried out publicly, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was emphasized as essential for every Muslim. Today government intervention is no longer needed because of a spontaneous groundswell of Islamic zeal. The notion of an Islamic state – as yet in some amorphous and diffuse form – is more popular today than ever before as people look desperately for miracles to rescue a failing state. Across the country there has been a spectacular increase in the power and prestige of the clerics, attendance in mosques, home prayer meetings (*dars* and *zikr*), observance of special religious festivals, and fasting during Ramadan

Villages have changed drastically, driven in part by Pakistani workers returning from Arab countries. Many village mosques are now giant madrassas that propagate hard-line Salafi and Deobandi beliefs through over-sized loudspeakers. They are bitterly opposed to Barelvis, Shias, and other Muslims who they do not consider to be Muslims. Punjabis, who were far more liberal towards women than Pukhtuns, are now beginning to take a line resembling the Taliban. Hanafi law has begun to prevail over tradition and civil law, as is evident from recent decisions in the Lahore High Court.

CURRICULUM DOCUMENT  
PRIMARY EDUCATION  
CLASSES K-V  
INTEGRATED AND SUBJECT BASED



NATIONAL BUREAU OF CURRICULUM AND TEXTBOOKS  
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION  
GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN  
ISLAMABAD  
1995

**EXCERPTS FROM ABOVE CURRICULUM DOCUMENT**

**National Bureau of Curriculum and Textbooks  
Federal Ministry of Education, 1995**

*Social Studies: At the completion of Class-V, the child should be able to:*

- **“Acknowledge and identify forces that may be working against Pakistan.”[pg154]**
- **“Demonstrate by actions a belief in the fear of Allah.” [pg154]**
- **“Make speeches on Jihad and Shahadat” [pg154]**
- **“Understand Hindu-Muslim differences and the resultant need for Pakistan.” [pg154]**
- **“India’s evil designs against Pakistan.” [pg154]**
- **“Be safe from rumour mongers who spread false news” [pg158]**
- **“Visit police stations” [pg158]**
- **“Collect pictures of policemen, soldiers, and National Guards” [pg158]**
- **“Demonstrate respect for the leaders of Pakistan” [pg153]**

In the Pakistani lower-middle and middle-middle classes lurks a grim and humorless Saudi-inspired revivalist movement that frowns on every expression of joy and pleasurable pastime. Lacking any positive connection to culture and knowledge, it seeks to eliminate “corruption” by regulating cultural life and seizing the control of the education system.

“Classical music is on its last legs in Pakistan; the sarangi and vichitarveena are completely dead”, laments Mohammad Shehzad, a music aficionado. Indeed, teaching music in public universities is violently opposed by students of the Islami Jamaat-e-Talaba, religious fundamentalists who consider music “haram”. Kathak dancing, once popular with the Muslim elite of India, has no teachers left. Pakistan produces no feature films of any consequence. Nevertheless, Pakistani elites, disconnected with the rest of the population, comfortably live their lives through vicarious proximity to the West. Alcoholism is a leading problem for the super-rich of Lahore, a curious irony for this deeply religious country.

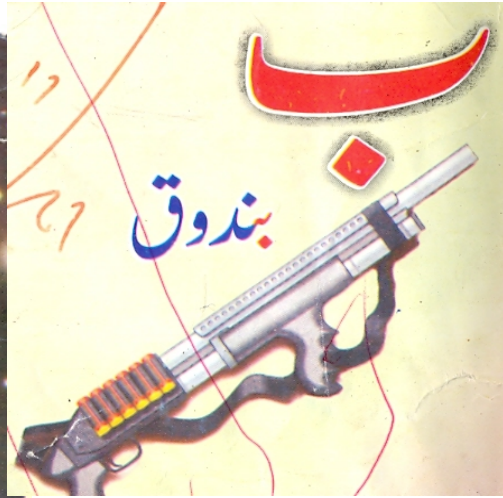
Islamization of the state and polity was supposed to have been in the interests of the ruling class. But the amazing success of the state is turning out to be its own undoing. Today it is under attack from religious militants, and rival Islamic groups battle each other with heavy weapons. Ironically the same army – whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad, and which saw itself as the fighting arm of Islam – today stands accused of betrayal, and is almost daily targeted by Islamist suicide bombers.

The militancy that bedevils Pakistan is by no means confined to the tribal areas; it breeds feverishly in the cities as well. Pakistan’s self-inflicted suffering comes from an education system that propagates the jihad culture, which ceaselessly demands that Islam be understood as a complete code of life, and which is designed to create in the mind of the schoolchild a sense of siege and embattlement.

Across the page, the reader can see the government approved curriculum, which is the basic road-map for transmitting values and knowledge to the young. By an act of Parliament passed in 1976, all government and private schools (except for O-level schools) are required to follow this curriculum. It was prepared by the Curriculum Wing of the Federal Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan. This document is a blueprint for a religious fascist state.



“Alif” (A) for Allah



“Bay” (B) for *bندوق* (gun)



“Tay” is for *takrao* (collision) and “topi” (cap)

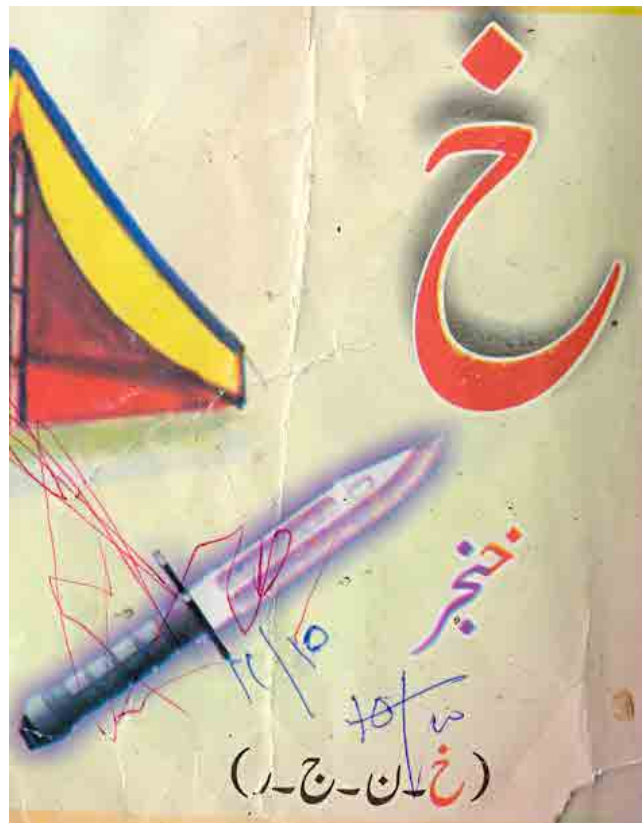
An illustrated primer for the Urdu alphabet prepared along “Islamic lines” by Iqra Publishers, Rawalpindi. This is not an officially approved textbook, but is being used currently (2008) by some regular schools, as well as madrassas, associated with the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI). The JUI is an Islamic political party that had allied itself with General Musharraf until very recently. These picture scans have been taken from a girl child’s book, together with her scribbles.

The world of the Pakistani schoolchild was largely unchanged even after September 11, 2001 which led to Pakistan's abrupt desertion of the Taliban and the slackening of the Kashmir jihad. Indeed, for all the talk of "enlightened moderation", General Musharaf's educational curriculum was far from enlightening. It was a slightly toned down copy of that under Nawaz Sharif which, in turn, was identical to that under Benazir Bhutto who had inherited it from General Zia-ul-Haq. Fearful of taking on powerful religious forces, every incumbent government has refused to take a position on the curriculum and thus quietly allowed young minds to be molded by fanatics. What might happen a generation later has always been a secondary matter for a government challenged on so many sides.

The promotion of militarism in Pakistan's schools, colleges, and universities had a profound effect upon young minds. Militant jihad became part of the culture on college and university campuses. Armed groups flourished, invited students for jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan, set up offices throughout the country, collected funds on Friday prayers, and declared a war without borders.



“Jeem” is for jihad



“Khay” is for khunjar (dagger)



“Hay” is for hijab



“Zal” is for *zunoob* (an unfamiliar word even for native Urdu speakers, means sins. Sinful objects are being set on fire here.)

The primary vehicle for Saudi-izing Pakistan's education has been the madrassa. During the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, they had provided the US-Saudi-Pakistani alliance recruits needed for fighting a holy war. Earlier on, they had turned out the occasional Islamic scholar, using a curriculum that essentially dates from the 11<sup>th</sup> century with only minor subsequent revisions. But their principal function had been to produce imams and muezzins for mosques.

The Afghan jihad changed everything. Under Zia, with active assistance from the Saudis, madrassas sprang up across the length and breadth of Pakistan. According to the national education census, which the ministry of education released in 2006, Punjab has 5,459 madrassas followed by NWFP with 2,843; Sindh, 1,935; Federally Administrated Northern Areas (FANA), 1,193; Balochistan 769; AJK 586; Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (Fata), 135, and Islamabad capital territory, 77. The ministry estimates that 1.5 million students are getting religious education in the 13,000 madrassas

These figures could be quite off the mark. Commonly quoted figures range between 18,000 and 22,000 madrassas. The number of students could be correspondingly larger. The free room, board and supplies to students, is a key part of their appeal. But the desire of parents for across the country. children to be "disciplined" and given a thorough Islamic education is also a major contributing factor.

Madrassas have deeply impacted upon the urban environment. For example, until a few years ago, Islamabad was a quiet, orderly, modern city different from all others in Pakistan. Still earlier it had been largely the abode of Pakistan's hyper-elite and foreign diplomats. But the rapid transformation of its demography brought with it hundreds of mosques with multi-barrelled audio-cannons mounted on minarets, as well as scores of madrassas illegally constructed in what used to be public parks and green areas. Now, tens of thousands of their students with little prayer caps dutifully chant the Quran all day. In the evenings they swarm around the city, making bare-faced women increasingly more nervous.



A madrasa in Islamabad, one of the 70 or more that have been established in the last 20 years.



Madrasa students enjoying a burning of video cassettes and CDs in Aabpara, Islamabad's main market in March, 2007. The materials had been handed over by frightened shopkeepers who thereafter switched to other businesses.

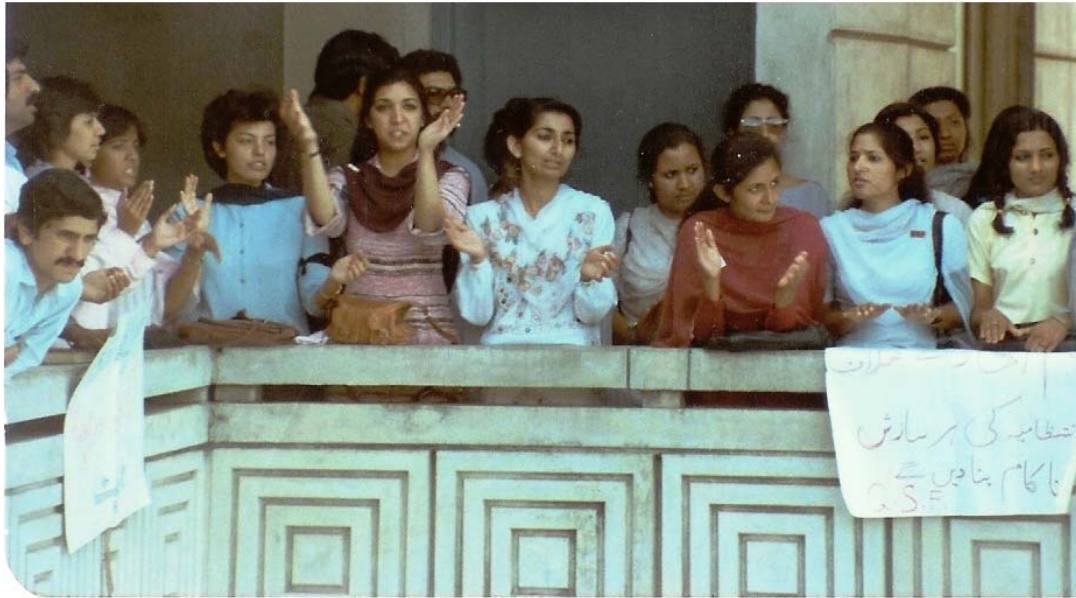


Total separation of the sexes is a central goal of the Islamists, the consequences of which have been catastrophic. For example, on April 9, 2006, 21 women and 8 children were crushed to death, and scores injured, in a stampede inside a three-storey madrassa in Karachi where a large number of women had gathered for a weekly congregation. Male rescuers, who arrived in ambulances, were prevented from moving injured women to hospitals.

One cannot dismiss this as just one incident. Soon after the October 2005 earthquake, as I walked through the destroyed city of Balakot, a student of the Frontier Medical College described to me how he and his male colleagues were stopped by religious elders from digging out injured girl students from under the rubble of their school building. The action of these elders was similar to that of Saudi Arabia's ubiquitous religious "*mutaween*" police who, in March 2002, had stopped schoolgirls from leaving a blazing building because they were not wearing their abayas. In rare criticism, Saudi newspapers had blamed the *mutaween* for letting 15 girls burn to death.

The Saudiization of a once-vibrant Pakistani culture continues at a relentless pace. The drive to segregate is now also being found among educated women. Vigorous proselytizers bringing this message, such as Mrs. Farhat Hashmi, have been catapulted to heights of fame and fortune. Their success is evident. Two decades ago the fully veiled student was a rarity on Pakistani university and college campuses. The "abaya", a long robe worn in Saudi Arabia, was an unknown word in Urdu. Today, some shops in Islamabad specialize in abayas. At colleges and universities across Pakistan, the female student is seeking the anonymity of the burqa. Now she outnumbers her sisters who still dare show their faces.

Although individuals may still thrive in spite of it, the veil profoundly affects habits and attitudes. Many veiled female students have largely lapsed into becoming silent note-takers, are increasingly timid, and are less inclined to ask questions or take part in discussions. This lack of self-expression and confidence leads to most Pakistani university students, including those in their mid- or late-twenties, referring to themselves as boys and girls rather than as men and women.



Chemistry department, Quaid-e-Azam University, in 1985. Left wing female and male students are protesting against the university administrations actions. Note the absence of any head gear.



Chemistry department, Quaid-e-Azam University, in 2008. About 80-90% of female students are either in burqa or hijab.

The immediate future of Pakistan is grim: increasing numbers of mullahs are creating cults around themselves and seizing control over the minds of worshippers. In the tribal areas a string of new Islamist leaders have suddenly emerged: Baituallah Mehsud, Fazlullah, Mangal Bagh, Haji Namdar,... An enabling environment of poverty, deprivation, lack of justice, and extreme differences of wealth is perfect for these demagogues.

In the longer term, we shall have to see how the larger political battle works out between Pakistanis who want an Islamic theocratic state and those who want a modern Islamic republic. It may yet be possible to roll back the Islamist laws and institutions that have corroded Pakistani society for over thirty years and to defeat the holy warriors. But this can only happen if Pakistan's elected leaders get the trust of citizens. To do this, political parties, government officials, and yes, even generals, will have to embrace democracy, in word and deed. This will ultimately determine whether Pakistan is to be a respectable member of the comity of states, or a pariah extremist state that breeds export-quality terrorism, and is a danger to its own people and the world.

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



A classroom scene at the International Islamic University, Islamabad 2008.