

**THE MENACE OF EDUCATION**  
**What Are They Teaching In Pakistani Schools Today?**  
by Pervez Hoodbhoy

From brain size and hair colour to the shape and texture of toe-nails, every characteristic of an individual is totally determined by just two twisted strands of human DNA. A similar cultural DNA – a society’s education system – contains within it the detailed genetic blueprint determining what that society is destined to become tomorrow. Forward oriented or fixated on the past, democratic or authoritarian, egalitarian or elitist, peaceful or violently engaged in civil strife – the choice between such options is made when one generation passes on to the next one its values and preferences.

So what are the values currently being transmitted and communicated in Pakistan’s schools? Obviously there is some variation across rich and poor schools, between villages and cities, and across provinces. But the basic road-map is provided by the school curriculum. Lest there be any confusion the reader should know that, by an act of Parliament passed in 1976, there is one and only one allowed road-map, prepared by the Curriculum Wing of the Federal Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan.

The usefulness of having a national curriculum was soon recognized by General Zia-ul-Haq. In 1981 he decreed that henceforth Pakistani education was to be totally redefined and history rewritten according to his vision of Pakistan. From now on the struggle for Pakistan was no longer to be shown as a victorious struggle for a Muslim homeland. Instead, it was to be depicted as the movement for an Islamic state run according to Islamic law. Even if it conflicted with reality, the heroes of the Pakistan movement – Jinnah, Iqbal, Syed Ahmed Khan – were to be projected as Islamic heroes. Furthermore all subjects, including the sciences, were to be speedily Islamized.

---

**EXCERPTS FROM CURRICULUM DOCUMENT FOR CLASSES K-V**  
**National Bureau of Curriculum and Textbooks**  
**Federal Ministry of Education, 1995.**

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

- **“Acknowledge and identify forces that may be working against Pakistan.”**[pg 154]
- **“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]

---

Two decades later the mindset of the Zia era, and the release of a pent-up religious rage, continues to be reflected in Pakistan’s currently enforced curriculum objectives [see Box] for primary school children. Sadly, while many Pakistanis are aware that there is something wrong with the nature of our schooling, only a few have access to public

documents such as those reproduced here and which expose us to international shame, condemnation, and ridicule. [Interestingly, in the foreword this curriculum document acknowledges that “support was provided by international organizations, in particular UNICEF, USAID, GTZ, and World Bank”. Shame on them!]

Consider the impact of the national curriculum objectives on a 12 year-old child in his last year of primary school. Instead of a future that is joyous, and a peaceful country that offers hope to all, he is told that life is actually about battling invisible enemies. Fear is ever-present because beneath every stone lurks a venomous snake and Pakistan is under the siege of sinister forces which the child must learn to acknowledge, identify, and fight to death. What mental space can remain for this child’s innocence when he or she must learn to make speeches on jihad and martyrdom? And what scope exists for being tolerant and accepting of beliefs other than your own?

What kind of people does the national curriculum seek to install as role models? They are not scholars and poets or scientists, nor people like Abdus Sattar Edhi or others who have struggled for the rights of others. Instead they are policemen, national guards, and soldiers. The child must collect their pictures, revere them, perhaps kiss them. His visits to police stations – where rapes, tortures, and deaths in custody occur so routinely as to be unremarkable – is expected to imbue him with the spirit of humanism and patriotism. Is a greater perversion of human values really possible?

Some of the curriculum objectives present more than just a slight difficulty of implementation. To “demonstrate by actions a belief in the fear of Allah” certainly left me stumped, but surely some wise reader can think of ways to grade a child on this. How it is possible to “be safe from rumour mongers who spread false news” is also beyond my intelligence to answer. As for the requirement to “demonstrate respect for the leaders of Pakistan”, one presumes that on the morning of the 12 October 1999 coup, a model student had to present evidence of respect for Mr. Nawaz Sharif, and in the evening for General Musharraf.

Could any part of what has been quoted in the Box be false? It all sounds so utterly bizarre that the reader may well raise this question. Indeed, at the ALIF education conference in Islamabad, held in April 2000, the head of the Curriculum Wing, Dr. Parveen Shahid, flatly denied that these points formed part of the present curriculum document. In front of a full audience of over 200 people she stated – as may be viewed on videotape by anyone interested – that no document in her department exceeded a few pages whereas the page numbers I had quoted were 153 and higher. A few days later, as a member of the government appointed Education Advisory Board, I brought my copy along to her office. It has 211 pages in all. At this point she informed me that she had multiple copies of the same document (containing exactly the points listed in the Box). She did not need my copy!

What I have related above is but one example of how bureaucrats of the Federal Ministry of Education, and particularly the Curriculum Wing, brazenly pursue their narrow and destructive agenda, unfazed and undeterred by those seeking change. Knowing that governments come and governments go but they will stay on forever, the education bureaucracy has closed ranks to protect their mutual interests. Therefore demands by

Education Advisory Board members that certain parts of the curriculum be dumped, as well as numerous strong reform proposals for school education, have been opposed, ignored, or mutilated out of recognition.

In what must constitute the most brazen of practices, minutes of Advisory Board meetings have been changed at will, twisted around, and manipulated as seen fit. Not surprisingly what has emerged at the end of several months are mere platitudes. Add to this that the language used is so pathetically poor that one has difficulty in deciphering official documents and minutes. For example I invite any reader to explain to me the following recommendation of an Advisory Board subcommittee: “females must be oriented for mental health”.

The conclusion one reaches is an unhappy one. The CW must be dissolved and curriculum development be rescued from the clutches of the Federal Education Ministry. One possibility is to entrust this work to certain of the country's universities. In doing so, Pakistan will not be doing anything out of the way. 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 some standardization of learning. India and Iran also have no national curriculum. If so many countries have demonstrated that they can exist and prosper without a national curriculum, there is no reason why Pakistan must be fixated upon having one.

Textbooks is another area needing radical reform. A comparison of Matric and O-level physics and mathematics books reveals a world of difference in the clarity of explanations, quality of questions and exercises, and choice of examples. Sadly, vested interests have successfully appealed to nationalist feelings and thus prevented a wider use of internationally available books. I have yet to understand what "Pakistani physics" or "Pakistani mathematics" means, unless this is meant to denote something shoddy and sub-standard.

Not surprisingly it is the Textbook Boards, together with their favoured authors, which promote this fake nationalism. In fact many individuals make huge profits by producing substandard and badly written books filled with conceptual, pedagogical, and printing mistakes. That their monopoly, under the protection of the state, should have been tolerated for so long is tragic. Under intense pressure from international education experts there had once been some movement on this issue -- in principle the Government had agreed to let private publishers compete and allow multiple textbooks to be used. Unfortunately the Education Ministry manipulated matters so as to empower the Curriculum Wing to select books. A former head of the CW – incidentally one of the most “patriotic” ones – had a certain fixed percentage for approving a book, to be deposited into an overseas bank account. So back to square one!

Where lies the way out? The answer needs to be given at several different levels. First, at the most basic level, there has to be a clear realization of the difference between the goals and methods of modern education as opposed to the madrassa system of Nizam-ul-Mulk of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, together with a clear statement of preference of the former over the

latter. Without this precondition, progress or lack of it, carries zero meaning. Pakistan needs modern, not madrassa, education.

At the second level lie reform issues related to the curriculum, textbooks, examinations, teacher training, school administration, etc. Here, instead of re-inventing the wheel, we need to speedily begin the process of implementation after critically evaluating the detailed reports and recommendations made by specialist teams, international and national. Over the last decade every major educational issue has been the subject of numerous costly and detailed studies. Some have been excellently done while others are only fair. But whatever one's opinion of the final recommendations made in these reports, the professionals who authored them set out the problems in clear and concise terms, marshalled data from various sources, and identified various options. To my astonishment, no such study was referred to at any time in any meeting of the Education Advisory Board although these studies had been commissioned by the Ministry of Education.

Thirdly, devolution of authority and resources is imperative. It is civil society which is the beneficiary of education and which, in our unique situation today, may best be entrusted with this task. A moronic, incompetent, self-obsessed, corrupt, and ideologically charged education bureaucracy today squarely blocks Pakistan's entry into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We cannot entrust the future of our country to those who cannot write a single straight sentence, and for whom good education means passivity, blind obedience, and indoctrination. We must also do battle with those who insist that Pakistani children learn in at least three languages – Urdu, English, Arabic – and often the mother tongue as well, which is usually different. This linguistic burden alone is sufficient to cripple children's minds.

While there are no quick fixes to a problem that has compounded over five decades, not a moment should be lost in beginning the slow process of rehabilitation and reform of the education system. A country suffering from xenophobia and hatred for others harms primarily itself. Therefore, instead of being virulent and aggressive, Pakistani patriotism must be identified with civic responsibilities such as paying one's fair share of taxes, acceptance of Pakistan's diversity of cultures and peoples, assurance of social justice, preserving the environment, and so forth. Without this change we have no future.

*Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy is professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. This article was published in The News, 11 June 2000.*