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Banning a textbook — the Punjab government panics

The new Urdu reader represented an attempt to remove blinkers forced on students by General Zia's education fantasia.

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Mayhem reigned inside the Punjab government after journalist Ansar Abbasi accused it of being “anti-Pakistan and anti-Islam”. In his *Jang* column of March 25, Mr Abbasi says that through “deceit, fraud, and treachery”, the PML-N government seeks to foist secularisation onto the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Former chief minister Shahbaz Sharif's crime was that he allowed the publication of a new matric-level Urdu textbook, the contents of which allegedly undermine the ideological foundations of Pakistan.

This tactic of “Islam in danger”, while often used by Mr Abbasi, is particularly bizarre in this case. The PML-N is right wing and pro-Islamist, and has sometimes been criticised for forging electoral alliances with extremist religious organisations. But, in the twinkling of an eye, and without even attempting a defence, the state machinery went into a tailspin as its top officials humbly confessed guilt and offered their profuse apologies. The book is said to have been withdrawn.

Mr Abbasi tells us proudly exactly what happened and why. On Saturday evening, an unknown caller alerted him that a new book was now on sale at bookstores and its contents were highly objectionable. He promptly sent for a copy and compared it with the earlier one. To his horror, says Mr Abbasi, he discovered that all mention of Islam and its teachings had been expunged. Moreover, Allama Iqbal was totally missing (*Allama Iqbal jaisay qaumi aur Islami sha'ir ko mukammal taur par ghaib kar diya gaya*). This “dirty and sinister” effort to secularise Pakistan had happened under the watch of the Muslim League. Not even the Indian Congress could have done something so outrageous.

Mr Abbasi writes that his agony and anger led to a sleepless night. So just after his *fajr* prayers, he started pushing the right buttons. Only hours later — at 9.30am on Sunday — the Punjab secretary of information called up to say that the present book had been withdrawn and his suggested revisions would be incorporated in the forthcoming edition. Patting himself on his back, Mr Abbasi says he is proud that Allah had chosen him to perform this good deed. Of course, the hundreds of thousands of copies already printed would have to be destroyed. But he had saved Pakistan!

Seeking to understand what had distressed Mr Abbasi so much, I bought a copy too. It was easy to find the very same one that he found so objectionable. But what I found was a distortion of reality, and wild exaggerations. Here is what I saw, and which the reader may readily verify.

Contrary to Allama Iqbal being absent, the front cover has the poet in his classic pose, thoughtfully staring at a candle. The very first item listed in the contents is a *hamd* (a poem in praise of Allah) by Hafeez Jalundhri. The second item is a *naat* (poem in praise of Prophet Muhammad, pbuh) by Ehsan Daanish. The third centres around the high-culture surrounding the Urdu-speaking elite of Delhi, while the fourth is a kind of fairy tale (*Paristan ki shahzadi*). Other items are “Letters of Ghalib”, “A camel's wedding”, “The tattle-tale”, “Celebrating Eidul Fitr”, “The story of Karbala”, “Thrive, thrive, Pakistan”, etc.

To claim that this is a dangerous book is the height of absurdity. My personal opinion is that it is rather insipid, has little contemporary relevance, the choice of essays and poems could have been better, and the end of chapter exercises ask for no more than straightforward reproductions. But other than this, it is scarcely worthy of comment.

So, what caused the violent condemnation from Mr Abbasi? How could the Punjab secretary of information declare the book unsuitable and withdraw the book on one individual's complaint, and without a proper investigation? Is this how textbooks, published after years of effort and much expense, will be banished in the future as well? What makes the issue still graver is that the book had been published under the supervision of a new curriculum authority created by the chief minister himself

who, in fright, overrode the recommendations of a committee that he had formed himself. The future of education in Pakistan will remain forever bleak unless one finds satisfactory answers to these questions.

At the outset, one needs to know that the withdrawn book was intended solely for the teaching of Urdu as a language, and should be judged on these grounds alone. Any book for teaching a language must introduce the student to great poets and essayists and delve into linguistic nuances and subtleties. It should not be just a supplementary text for teaching Islamic studies. Students use an entire, separate book for Islamiyat.

This episode is important for only one reason: the new Urdu reader represented an attempt, albeit a feeble one, to remove the blinkers forced upon students by General Ziaul Haq's education fantasia. The 1980s Islamisation of education meant that every subject — languages, geography, history, social studies, chemistry, physics, mathematics, etc. — could only be viewed through a narrow prism. All else was to be shunned and filtered out. It is this attempt to break loose that Mr Abbasi finds so terribly objectionable.

Pakistan's educational system and the books used in schools unquestionably needs drastic reform. Our education does not prioritise the production of well-informed, socially responsible, thoughtful and civic-minded individuals. It does not ask for creating a mindset that can readily accept Pakistan's diversity of religions, languages and cultures. It pays relatively little attention to what much of the rest of the world considers important: knowing and respecting the law of the land, preserving the environment, etc. Instead, what goes under the name of education here emphasises ritual, tradition and submission to authority. It is this which needs changing.

The shameful retreat of the Punjab government before the forces of narrow-minded intolerance and prejudice augurs ill for the future. It negates the good work done by Shahbaz Sharif in the education sector. Sadly, yet another generation of children will be deprived of their right to an unblinkered view of the world. We, the citizens, must not allow such blackmail by any individual or group to succeed.

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