

Schools, Syllabuses, and Human Rights: An Evaluation of Pakistan's Education System

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Many writers and even a few official documents acknowledge education to be a basic human right (Government of Pakistan 1998:1). Although the Constitution does not include the right to education in its fairly long Fundamental Rights, in Principles of Policy it declares it the State's responsibility to

- promote the educational and economic interests of the lower classes, combat illiteracy, and provide free and compulsory secondary education as soon as possible;
- make technical and professional education generally available and higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of merit; and
- enable people of different areas, through education, training, agricultural and industrial development, and other methods, to participate fully in all forms of national activity, including employment in the service of the country (Government of Pakistan 1985).

The Constitution was enacted in 1973, but its high ideals have yet to be achieved.

Education has a multiplier effect: an educated individual is more likely to be aware of all other fundamental rights. Moreover, Sankar Sen writes: "Only the people who are aware of their rights can ensure that their rights will not be trampled on. Learning about one's own rights builds respect for the rights of others and gives confidence to assert them" (Sen 1998: 53).

Overview of the Education System

Pakistan's educational system has a checkered past of high ideals and promises and a dismal record of achievement. Education in the last 53 years has remained an arena of experimentation, and implementation of divergent, often contradictory, policies. *Human Development in South Asia 1998* states that "while South Asia is the most illiterate region in the world, Pakistan is the most illiterate country within South Asia" (Haq and Haq 1998: 51). Unofficial but authoritative sources put Pakistan's literacy rate at about 38%. The literacy rates for males and females are 50% and 24%, respectively. Of the total adult population of 76 million, of which 60% are women, 49 million, about two thirds, are illiterate. Moreover, of all primary-school-age children, 37% of the boys and 55% of the girls do not go to school. More than half the children who do go to school drop out before completing grade 5. The average mean years of schooling is just 1.9 years, which compares poorly with 3.9 years for other developing countries (Haq and Haq 1998: 51).

Enrolment at the secondary level is only 21%, or half the South Asian average. Pakistan's ter-

tiary enrolment ratio is 2.6%, the lowest in the region and half that of India's. Only 1.6% of secondary-school students opt for technical and vocational education. From 1951 to 1997, the literacy rate rose by a mere 1.2% per annum. In Balochistan—the country's most backward province—female literacy is just 1.7%. This dismal record is the reason that Pakistan ranked 134 in human development out of 174 countries in 1997 (Haq 1997: 40), despite the fact that it has had 12 high-level education reports and 5 major education policies, of which the World Bank made 6, and the Asian Development Bank, 1 (Ahmed 1999).

Government efforts to evolve an education policy began soon after the creation of the country in 1947, when the All-Pakistan Education Conference was held, and again in 1951. In 1958, General Mohammad Ayub Khan imposed martial law and established the Commission on National Education under S.M. Sharif. The commission's report, published in 1959, recommended that the education system should meet individual and collective needs and enable people to live productive lives according to their talents and interests. The policy thus undertook to develop people's skills, train a leadership group, and promote vocational abilities. Although the report identified the objective of education as the creation of a welfare state and possessed a liberal and Western outlook, the educational system it projected was elitist. The Ayub regime was toppled by General Mohammad Yahya Khan in 1969. To pacify student unrest, which had contributed to the downfall of Ayub Khan, General Yahya established a new commission under Air Marshal Noor Khan, whose new education policy was published in 1969.

The Noor Khan Commission report suggested some bold measures such as democratizing education and freeing it from bureaucratic control. Most of the report's recommendations, however, were not implemented. In December 1971, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto established a civilian regime and in 1972 introduced

an eight-year education policy, whose numerous objectives included equalizing education opportunities, arresting declining educational standards, and correcting the growing imbalance among various types of education. The policy claimed to adjust educational programs according to society's economic needs. It committed itself to make education an instrument of social change and development and to bring about a democratic social order by nationalizing schools, thereby expanding educational opportunities for the poor and improving teachers' salaries. The policy failed and education deteriorated. In the absence of community participation, nationalization paved the way for corruption and a greater role for the bureaucracy.

In 1977, Pakistan once again fell under a military dictatorship, led by General Zia-ul-Haq, whose education policy of 1979 can be summarized by its slogan, "Islamization of Education." Neither the government nor its educationists could define Islamization, which produced only confusion.¹ General Zia also reversed the policy of nationalization and privatized schools, soon turning schools into businesses more concerned with profit than the improvement of education.

With the restoration of civilian rule in 1988, successive governments came up with their own education policies. The 1992 education policy proclaimed a number of objectives:

- Modernize the educational system.
- Promote the teaching of Islam in social sciences to strengthen students' cultural moorings.
- Bring out students' creative, critical, and dynamic abilities.
- Provide equal opportunities to the poor and rich alike.
- Ensure 100% participation of children in education at the primary level by the year 2000.
- Eradicate illiteracy through formal and nonformal methods.

- Revise the curriculums to improve the quality of education.
- Promote an academic and democratic culture in schools.
- Improve the role of the private sector in education.
- Urge the community to participate in educational affairs.

In 1998, during his second term, Nawaz Sharif introduced a 12-year education policy aimed at preparing Pakistan to enter the 21st century as an advanced country. The policy also set high targets. For example, it aimed to make education universal by 2010 by accomplishing the following:

- building 40,000 new primary schools;
- starting evening classes in 20,000 schools, apart from establishing a similar number of mosque schools;
- establishing 15,000 middle schools and 7,000 secondary schools in the next five years;
- increasing enrolment in the polytechnic institutes from 42,000 to 62,000 by 2002;
- making curriculums relevant to the needs of the 21st century;
- suggesting innovative programs such as nonformal basic education, community schools, use of mosque schools for formal primary education, provision of education cards for needy students, setting up residential model secondary schools in rural areas (initially one in each district), introducing competitive textbooks at the secondary-school level, introducing a national education testing service, decentralizing the system, and mobilizing the community, etc.

The policy, in fact, strengthened centralization. For instance, it proposed the formation of district education authorities, which were likely to facilitate bureaucratic control of education. It was also vague about the medium of instruction. It did not offer to bring an end to

prevalent parallel systems of education. It sought to demilitarize educational institutions without realizing that violence could not be curbed at the point of its occurrence and that without demilitarizing society itself, the educational institutions could not be demilitarized. The policy also did not offer to end the social-class and gender biases in the syllabus (Government of Pakistan 1998).

Pakistan was thus never short of policies and programs that, despite their different ideological and motivational thrusts, suggested positive measures. If the country did not move toward educational emancipation, it was due to the failure of the implementers, the lack of political will on the part of the successive governments, and wrong national priorities.

The education system

The Constitution provides that legislative and executive competence over various subjects be divided between the federal and provincial governments. The federal government alone has jurisdiction over the federal list of subjects, while both the federal and provincial governments have jurisdiction over the concurrent list. The Constitution does not have a separate list of provincial subjects, but all subjects not included in the two lists mentioned are left to the discretion of the provinces. The subject of education has also been bifurcated in parts: while curriculums, syllabuses, planning, policy, centers of excellence, standards of education, and Islamic education come under the concurrent list, the rest are in provincial competence. Since the Constitution also lays down that federal legislation has primacy in any case over subjects on the concurrent list, the central government dominates the provinces. However, while planning, policymaking, and financial control are in the hands of the federal government, the provinces are responsible for the execution of the policies and the actual running of the system. Although a set of educational institutions is directly under the

federal government, most institutions come under the provinces. In 1979, the federal government took over the funding of universities.

The Federal Curriculum Wing of the Federal Education Ministry prepares the outlines of curriculums. The provinces have their own bureaus of curriculum, which, in practice, do not prepare curriculums but train the school teachers. The provincial textbook boards, which also publish and distribute textbooks, prepare the prescribed textbooks in the provinces.

Structure of education

Formal education has different levels: classes 1 to 5 are the primary level; 6 to 8, middle school; 9 to 10, secondary; 11 to 12, higher secondary; and 13 to 16, higher education. Higher education is further designated as bachelor (13 and 14) and masters (15 and 16). Examinations are held at the end of the 5th (primary), 8th (middle), 10th (matriculation), 12th (higher secondary or intermediate), 14th (bachelor), and 16th (masters) year. The end-of-the-level or terminal examinations are held under the directorate of schools (primary and middle), boards of education (secondary and higher secondary), and universities (bachelors and masters). Some universities follow the semester system; others, the annual-examination system.

Certain schools, mostly in urban areas, follow the Cambridge system, in which the ordinary-level examinations are held after 11 years of schooling, and the advanced-level examinations after 13.

There also exist *deeni madaris* (religious seminaries), which provide traditional religious education in both rural and urban areas. Since the 1980s, *deeni madaris* have received official approbation, patronage, and, in many cases, financial support. The final *sanad* (certificate) of the *deeni madaris* is the equivalent of a masters of arts in Islamiat and Arabic. Moreover,

by integrating the *Dars-e-Nizami* (traditional religious syllabus of the seminaries) with formal courses, a *Dars-e-Nizami* group was created at the matriculation and intermediate level. In order to bring the parallel systems of formal education and *Dars-e-Nizami* closer, the National Education Policy (1998-2010) announced the inclusion of formal school subjects such as English, math, general science, economics, and Pakistan studies, etc. into the curriculum of *deeni madaris*. It also announced that the latter's *asnaad* would be equated with the formal certificates and degrees in the formal sector (Government of Pakistan 1998: 22).

Technical and vocational education constitute an important component of education in Pakistan. Technical education is offered as post-secondary training to prepare technicians to work as middle-level supervisory staff. Vocational education is lower-level training aimed at preparing semiskilled and skilled workers in various trades. The Federal Ministry of Education is in charge of policy planning, coordination of standards, and curriculum development for post-secondary technical education. The Ministries of Education, Labor and Manpower, Industries, Social Welfare, and Agriculture share other responsibilities related to technical education. The provincial education departments generally run vocational institutes. Apart from training engineering technicians, they also administer commercial education institutes (Government of Pakistan 1998).

Human Rights Content of Curriculums

Pakistan's curriculums have oscillated between liberal and conservative approaches. At times, conflicting themes have been incorporated into the same syllabus.

The subject load is fairly heavy. A student has to study at least two languages and two other compulsory subjects (Islamiat and social studies or Pakistan studies) at almost every level. Mathematics, general science, and other

subjects are taught from the primary level. In at least one province (Sindh), students are required to study their regional language. All this greatly hampers students' ability to learn.

Syllabuses' response to human rights

Subjects in which human rights can be projected include social studies, Pakistan studies, Islamiat, and literature. A survey of textbooks of the first three subjects taught from classes 1 to 14 reveals a number of important points about the curriculum planners' treatment of human rights themes:

- Human rights issues are never consciously incorporated into the curriculums. References to human rights are sporadic and do not represent a systematic thought pattern. For instance, a number of textbooks on social studies for classes 1, 3, and 8, and on Islamiat for classes 1, 2 and 3, fail to mention human rights. A few books in other subjects at other levels mention human rights occasionally and without explanation.
- Textbooks do not develop the concept of human rights. For instance, social studies books for class 6 published by the Sindh and Punjab textbook boards mention the rights and duties of citizens clearly and in some detail. But the social studies book for the next class (class 7), published by the same boards, has only four sentences about the rights of citizens. The social studies book for class 8 (published by the Punjab Board), mentions "human rights" in two places, regarding the United Nations and without detailed explanation of human rights. The Sindh Textbook Board's book for the same grade does not mention human rights at all.
- Textbook references to human rights are too brief to make an impact on children, and teachers hesitate to expand on text approved by the authorities.
- There are no special educational manuals on human rights education.
- Social studies and Pakistan studies textbooks have less human rights content compared to Islamiat. In Islamiat, themes of human rights do recur either directly or indirectly as references to *Huqooq-ul-Ebad* (rights of other human beings), *Huqooq-ullah* (rights of God), and *Adl-o-Ehsan* (justice and favor). Enlightened teachers may make use of these concepts to teach human rights.
- Textbooks do not address social problems directly and make no reference to gender inequality, bonded labor, *Karo Kari* (honor killing), *Watta Satta* (exchange marriage), numerous inhuman tribal customs, child labor, and discrimination against minorities. They fail to present the social context of the country. They merely provide lists of virtues and good behavior.
- Textbooks do not even refer to the Constitution, which cites a number of basic rights, among them the rights to life and liberty. It also forbids slavery, forced labor, traffic in human beings, the employment of any child below the age of 14 years in any factory, mine, or other hazardous employment. It lays down that dignity of the human being and the privacy of the home shall be inviolable, and that every citizen has the right to move freely, to assemble, to form an association or union, to form or be a member of a political party, to enter into any lawful profession or occupation, and to conduct any lawful trade or business. The freedom of speech and expression, and the right to profess, practice, and propagate one's religion are also ensured. Perhaps because the government itself has not respected the Constitution and since it oversees curriculum design, the authors of the syllabuses have no choice but to refrain from citing the Constitution.

Some recent official initiatives

Although human rights education remains a neglected area, governments have recently taken a few initiatives to promote it as international awareness of human rights grows. Moreover, the civilian regimes during 1988-1999 at least mouthed human rights rhetoric in order to demonstrate their departure from the system of the past. However, as the reports of independent human rights organizations such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and Amnesty International show, the civilian regimes did not improve the state of human rights. The measures they took were either half-hearted or not supported by strong action. In fairness to the civilian regimes, however, the measures they announced may be mentioned.

In 1994, the United Nations General Assembly declared 1995-2004 as the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, coinciding with a few government decisions on human rights. For example, the Human Rights Cell was created in the Ministry of Interior in 1993. In September 1994, it was shifted to the Ministry of Law. In December 1995, the government established a full-fledged Ministry of Human Rights. In December 1996, after the overthrow of Benazir Bhutto's second government, the acting government dissolved the ministry, re-created the Human Rights Wing, and attached it to the Ministry of Law, now renamed Ministry of Law, Justice and Human Rights. The ministry is responsible for meeting the national and international obligations and commitments of the government regarding charters, covenants, and agreements of which Pakistan is a signatory. It is also entrusted with the job of protecting and promoting human rights. Its functions are the following:

Apart from reviewing the human rights situation in the country, including implementation of law, policy and measures, the Ministry also takes initiatives in harmonization of

legislations, regulations and practices with the international covenants/ agreements to which Pakistan is a party. The Ministry also represents Pakistan in international bodies, organizations and conferences in conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ghauri 1999).

The government is committed to a number of international human rights agreements. As a signatory of the UN Charter, it is obliged to respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It has so far signed and ratified the following covenants and agreements:

- Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of *Apartheid*;
- International Convention against *Apartheid* in Sports;
- Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide;
- Protocol amending the Slavery Convention;
- Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery;
- Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others; and
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

One important decision that coincided with the Decade was the establishment of the Senate's Functional Committee on Human Rights, which reviews the human rights situation and recommends remedial measures. The Jail Reforms Commission submitted its own recommendations. A judicial commission was established, headed by a Supreme Court justice, in order to examine and review laws found to be discriminatory against women. It submitted its report in 1997.

The Ministry of Law, Justice and Human Rights runs a Human Rights Mass Awareness

and Education Program with the following aims:

- Create awareness of human rights among the masses in general and government officers of law enforcement agencies in particular.
- Train target groups involved with human rights promotion and protection.
- Develop syllabuses and curriculums with the aim of training and educating the target groups.
- Identify, support, and strengthen an institute at a national university that will conduct research and other human rights-related activities.

The ministry is also a partner in the Promotion and Implementation of Human Rights: An Institutional Capacity Building Project. The human rights education component of the project has the main objectives of enabling the participants to “stimulate and support... national and... local initiatives in the field of human rights education and awareness raising [and provide them with] new training tools and ideas on methodologies to disseminate the human rights message through education activities” (ILO 2000).

The project, to be completed in 30 months, has four phases:

- research;
- training of trainers, seminars, and preliminary design of the action plan;
- implementation of the action plan; and
- evaluation.

Recommendations

The government has thus taken the first steps on the long road to establishing human rights education. Some areas require strong initiatives:

- The State alone can restructure the educational system and only after it becomes democratic, egalitarian, and humane.

- The first thing the government should do is evaluate the system and ascertain and analyze its distortions.
- Curriculums should be purged of national, class, social, gender, and communal biases.
- Curriculums should incorporate the Pakistani social context in order to become more acceptable and relevant to the students. Students should learn about human rights violations committed in the country. They should also become socially conscious and infused with the spirit of critical enquiry and judgment.
- Teaching methods must also be improved. The manner in which knowledge is imparted, the language used, the models chosen, and the teacher-student relationship are important in this respect. Even before reading the text, children look to the teacher, their first guide and role model.
- Learning methods and tools must improve and harmonize with human rights values.
- Education must be universal if it is to be a vehicle of human rights.
- School-community linkages, now still almost nonexistent, are essential to promote human rights.

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Note

1. For a vivid discussion of the consequences for education of the Islamization policy, see Hoodbhoy and Nayyar (1985).